

The Promise

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Escape. A dream as old as time; a whisper echoed through space. But for these two friends, their getaway is about to get complicated. A murder, the military, and suddenly Maria's world is turned upside-down.

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Wake

A/N:

Hey, everyone. I've done a small rewrite to this story. Nothing major, just updating some areas I felt were lacking and tweaking a few scenes I didn't like. This story still doesn't fully reflect my current writing quality, and I didn't want to mess with it too much, but it's a little less outdated.

This is the first in a trilogy focused on Shadow and Maria. This series has a lot of one-shots and spinoffs as well, such as Snow Angel and Black & White. If you liked this, please check those out too. You can also find them all collected together on my AO3 account if that's easier to navigate.

Despite the impression of these first chapters, this story has a generally serious tone and involves issues like abuse and murder.

Enjoy.

Ec hoes of Eternity: Part 1

Lost...

Endless I wander through a dream, set adrift through scattered memories. Around me is void, nothing, an expanse of tiny lights that flare and stretch into infinity. Floating absently through this dark and lonely existence, I sleep.

And then I open my eyes to light, light, light. Wrapped in eternity, the world closes in on me, blinding me. Small pieces of infinite choices slip through my fingers, each one a mirror of the last, yet different in the tiniest of ways. Snow. Yes, that's what it is that surrounds me. It's

something... something I'll never get to see. Except here. Only in this fleeting shard of eternity.

I seek it out: the black star. A tiny warmth that flickers through the blizzard, pulling me in. From the very beginning, we were drawn to one another, no purpose except to find each other; no reason to exist, except for that cause.

I saw him standing there, trapped in the void I had come from. Alone. He was always alone. It seemed I could never catch up to him, but I reached out anyway.

"Shadow," I said, my whisper swept away by the storm. Hesitantly, he took my hand. And for just a moment, there was a spark of warmth in that cold, empty world.

It was the beginning; it was the end.

But that's the thing about dreaming. Someday you have to wake up.

She awoke into darkness, the encroaching shadows twisting around her like a snake and pulling her back into the protection of sleep. The young girl's silhouette crept sluggishly along the wall, tracing smooth metal until it found the switch. She rubbed her eyes and pushed the covers back as the lights snapped on, sending the snakes slithering back under the bed.

Every day, a tiny miracle. She'd survived to see another morning. And here was the same place again: same sterile white walls, same blinking green lights on the monitor, the small room she had slept in every night for nearly her entire life. Always, she awakened into a day much like the others before.

Her room was decorated comfortably enough, with an overflowing bookshelf, a toybox, and her bed slotted into an alcove in the far corner. But the soft rug couldn't quite ward off the cold of the metal floors, and the pictures on the wall did little to mask the violently

blank grey. There was no sunlight, and no life; she was always miserably aware of those walls closing in on her.

So Maria dreamed. Of escape; of other worlds, places where it snowed forever, where she ran free without the narrow walls of this ship confining her. Every day was different, in some small way, rather than an endless procession of sameness.

But her dreams were just that. Fantasy. Make-believe.

Flinching, the girl tugged at the electrodes hooking her to the bulky vitals monitor until they detached from her arms and chest. The sudden screech as the machine registered no heartbeat nearly sent her through the roof. Immediately the panel above her bed began ringing, only adding to the cacophony. With a grimace, she shut off the squealing box and scrambled to answer the call.

Professor Robotnik's frowning face promptly appeared on the little monitor. Though it was only five inches long, worry clearly creased his brow. "Maria! How many times have I told you? First turn off the machine, and *then* remove the leads! You're going to give your old grandfather a heart attack..."

Showing a rare display of petulance, the child scowled. "Why do I have to use this old thing anyway?"

"Now, Maria," said Gerald, his tone patient despite having explained this many times, "you know what happened the last time your blood pressure dropped. Any longer before Dr. P found you and you would have had a stroke! We just need to make sure you're alright."

Maria flopped back down on the bed, sighing into her pillow. For all of her seven years, this was what she had known. Machines and medication, always someone worrying over her. It was a lifeless existence, a constant reminder that she may not live to see the next day.

She made the best of it as she, the ray of sunshine on the ARK, was apt to. But even she felt discouragement at the end of the day, when the steady beeping of the heart monitor lulled her to sleep.

And the Professor was even worse for wear. Saving Maria was his obsession, and all of his worrying left him stressed and grey.

But now, a bit of hope shone in his voice. "Cheer up, Little Alice. That wasn't all I needed to talk to you about. You remember the project I've been working on?"

"It's done?!" Maria bolted up, surprising her grandfather with the sheer force of the grin on her face. After how drained she'd been lately, he thought perhaps she'd never beam like that again.

"Yes, but - Maria, you haven't even - !" Gerald sighed and laughed to himself, rubbing the back of his bald head as he ended the video call. She had run off, barely taking the time to put her shoes on.

A few minutes later, the pitter-patter of Maria's tiny feet on the metal floor signalled her arrival. The door to the lab slid open at her approach, and she peeked into the darkness, shivering as a chill washed out into the hallway.

Though it sometimes gave her the creeps, she liked her grandfather's personal laboratory. Whereas the other labs were blindingly bright and filled with the roar of a hundred scientists' conversations, only the soft hum of machinery drifted out from this moodily lit room.

Maria padded in silently, gazing around at the cluttered tables and shadowed figures of machinery. The lab was a mess, which meant Grandfather had been busier than usual. Most of the time, the place was spotless, not the haphazard disarray it was in now.

"Grandfather?" she called softly into the dark. No response but the distant clicking of a keyboard.

Turning the corner of a particularly high stack of crates, she nearly ran into a stasis tube. Stepping back, she peered up at the green luminescent tank that loomed tall over her. Her frail heart gave a resounding thump, and though she was the picture of calm, fear entered her small being.

In moments, though, that apprehension turned reluctantly to curiosity. She took a few small steps closer, staring at the strange creature trapped within the glass.

"What is it?" she asked aloud. Her hair, green-gold in the light, fell to the side as she tilted her head.

The Professor's booming voice, so unlike his granddaughter's, resounded behind her. From the shadows he stepped forward, the cylindrical tank's light illuminating his face. "This, my dear Maria," he rumbled like a volcano, "is the final result of Project Shadow."

The young girl stared at the appropriately named creation. Suspended in fluid, arms spread as if beseeching, his chest gently rose and fell as a mouthpiece pumped oxygen into his body. His slick fur was pitch black, shockingly contrasted with reds and whites running along his head and limbs.

Though only humans resided on the ARK, Maria had read about the Faunas of Earth in countless books. This one, somehow, felt different. Compared to the pictures she'd seen, he looked in no way out of the ordinary - but there was just something about him that exuded power, strength, will.

He's scary. That was the first thing Maria thought about him. And she was justified. Stunted and small as she was, he was nearly as big as her, and his darker colours reminded her of nightmares.

And yet, staring at him, she couldn't find much logical reason to be afraid. His appearance was frightening, but... he looked peaceful. Serene, even. And this was the creature who was going to save her,

if Grandfather was right. How could he create something that would hurt her?

Maria trepidly tapped on the tank and relaxed when the hedgehog within remained immobile. "What's his name?"

The Professor, who had returned to his computer to examine diagnostics, looked momentarily taken aback. The idea of a name, something so indicative of humanity, had never crossed his mind. To him, Experiment 56 was just a test subject, nothing more.

"Maria, there have been many before him. This iteration looks promising, but he may not even survive out of stasis." Gerald glanced over his shoulder before returning to his work. "Besides, he's just an experiment. He may have a brain, but he... he can't think for himself."

Gerald did wonder just what this artificial Faunas was capable of, but he knew that his experiment could not get out of control. It was hardwired in his brain: do not make choices, do not think, do not feel. A mere simulation of life.

The little girl might have been timid, but she could be stubborn too. She crossed her arms, face set. "He needs a name."

Gerald sighed, shuffling to the other side of the desk to pick up some reports, but his bushy moustache twitched in a slight smile. "You can name him, then."

Maria thought about it for only a moment. She knew her grandfather had named this project after the shadows he had been chasing in an attempt to cure her. Something that always lingered, yet untouchable. Always ever so slightly out of reach. But now, they finally stood together under that shadow.

"Shadow."

"Just that?" Gerald asked. Usually, he thought, Maria was much more creative than that.

"It's gotta be Shadow."

Gerald knew that it didn't matter, but he decided to humour his granddaughter and picked up a pen. "Alright, Little Alice, whatever you want. Experiment 56," he said, his blocky, no-nonsense letters stamping the top of the report. "Shadow."

And somewhere far away, Shadow dreamed. He dreamed of a harsh, lonely world, a world relentless in its cruelty. Unchangeable, eternal, and yet. On the horizon, a golden star, the only warmth in that existence. The tiniest shot at change.

Even as the dream faded to cold and dark, it never stopped shining. Though it trembled like a fire about to go out, still it remained, the only thing he could see.

Lost among the dying stars, he wondered how a world so full of suffering could contain this impossible beauty.

Maria gasped and stumbled backwards, hitting the boxes behind her and making her grandfather snap up in alarm. Noticing what had startled her, he shook his head. "It's just a reflex, Maria. He's probably not awake." Gerald turned back to his work, oblivious to Maria's wonder.

But she knew he was wrong. Because Shadow's eyes were open, and they were locked on her. It was unmistakable. She straightened and his gaze followed her. She blinked, and he blinked too. The young girl giggled quietly. She supposed he wasn't so bad. As she approached the stasis tube again, the dusky hedgehog's eyes trailed her all the way.

They flicked to her hand as she placed it against the cool glass, feeling the gentle hum of the machinery that surrounded him. With some difficulty in the viscous fluid, Shadow raised his arm and

looked at it, as if unsure what to do with it. But, hesitantly, he reached out and pressed it against Maria's hand.

And the only thing between them was an inch of glass.

A week passed without event. Maria waited all those long days, hoping just to get the chance to see Shadow again. Things were looking good for his viability, but there was a lot to do before he'd be able to survive outside of his pod, and Gerald was pushing himself harder than ever.

But every day that passed came with the chance that Maria just wouldn't wake up, or that her illness would flare and it would be too much for her body to handle this time. Any week could be her last, and she knew it. Maria didn't have the liberty of time, but there was nothing to be done. Shadow wasn't ready, so she had to wait.

That was a sad existence, for a child to understand her own mortality, but that's the way it was. Some things just were. And it'd been so long a part of her reality that she never really wondered if there could be anything else.

To her credit, Maria did do her best. Even during those weeks when she relapsed and her health declined. When Gerald, eternally "too busy right now", somehow found the time to stay with her all day as she remained trapped beneath the covers. She knew what that meant.

Even, when she recovered and could walk again, the beeping of the vitals machine reminding her that this was only temporary.

But she held onto hope where others would have just let it die. Hope that someday she would step off this ship for the last time, and feel the warmth of the sun on a body untainted with the virus that plagued her.

It was just a daydream. But we all need something to wish for.

Though she remained optimistic, Gerald knew that Maria was beginning to waste away. If things went on as they were, she probably wouldn't live to see her thirteenth birthday. The signs were too subtle even for the girl herself to notice, but the Professor saw them quite clearly.

By now, all the blood had drained from once-rosy cheeks, and the scrawny child became ever more frail with each passing year. She was already unusually small for her age, but it seemed as if her growth had completely stagnated.

Maria's pallid skin becoming greyer, how little she seemed to grow, her constant fatigue... She used to have so much energy. Always running. Always laughing. That smile, as brilliant as the sun, always flashing. But now, she slept and slept.

So his nights were spent always in the lab, long after everyone else had retired. Even after this breakthrough, he still had much work to do yet. But for the first time, he felt like they might just have a chance.

Though one thing still troubled him about Maria. Her unusual lethargy went back further than the illness setting in, which was strange. Even when she'd still looked healthy, a few years ago, she had suddenly started losing energy. Maybe that had just been the NIDS taking its toll on her before she began to show outward signs. Maybe not. But what had caused that was an issue, though always on his mind, he hadn't yet the time to track down.

Maria, however, tried not to think about such things. Today, she was engrossed in her usual activity: reading. Specifically *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (for the 21st time).

It wasn't that she had a lack of reading material; Gerald was sure to have the scientists on holiday bring back many Earthly treasures for her. She had amassed quite the collection of toys and books. They were piled in her toybox, her shelves packed to the brim with trinkets.

But Alice in Wonderland had enchanted her since the first time Grandfather read her the story. It sparked a new hope in her: the dream of escape. To her, Earth was akin to Wonderland. A distant fairytale just waiting to be discovered.

In the end, Alice awoke to find that it had all been a dream. Maria hoped one day to wake up in Wonderland instead.

Heavy footsteps resounded down the hall, but she was too engrossed in her reading to notice. The girl shrank back instinctively as the door beeped and slid open, but only her grandfather's serious face met her.

"Maria?" he questioned, narrow eyes examining her. His tone, usually light-hearted and jovial with his granddaughter, was strangely somber. "Come with me."

"Why? What happened?" she asked, sliding off the bed and slipping her shoes on.

"Shadow is awake."

That certainly convinced her. Still struggling to pull on a last slipper, she snatched the book off her bed and bounced over excitedly. "Really? Can I meet him? Can he talk?"

Tenderly he took her tiny hand in his large one and led her into the hallway, but his solemn expression didn't falter. "You can see him."

It was silent after that, as they walked side-by-side through the long halls. The ARK, though a monotonous place to live, could be credited for being peaceful at least. The only sound was a distant hum from machinery deep within its core. Sometimes a muffled voice came through the thick metal walls, but quickly lapsed into quiet again.

Soon they reached the outer halls of the ship, where wide windows offered a clear view of the beautiful star-studded reaches of space.

But even better than that, if the ARK was at just the right point of orbit and rotation, one might catch a glimpse of Earth.

And as luck would have it, there the blue orb sat, only its top half visible from where they stood. Beneath a thick vortex of clouds, a bit of green was just discernible. Beyond that, pale blue ocean as far as the eye could see.

Maria leaned on the sill beneath a window, staring down at her beloved planet hung amongst the stars below. A slight smile crossed her face as she drifted into fantasies of life on Earth. Gerald looked down too, hoping Maria didn't notice the deep sadness etched on his face.

He had failed her all these years. Nothing could ever excuse having ripped her from her only home when she was barely a year old, and not even being able to promise that she would live to see that place again.

Of course, he had no choice. If she so much as caught a cold, the results could be catastrophic. To get early access to the experimental medication, the drugs that had barely kept her alive this long, he'd had little other option than to take this job.

But it wasn't just the ability to prolong her life a bit longer. He'd been promised the chance to work on a cure, if he gave the government what they wanted. That'd gone about as well as it ever had... But after his recent "breakthrough", he'd simply combined those two goals into one.

A chance to truly cure her, to cure all fatal disease - that was something he couldn't pass up. Not after everything he'd done to get this far.

And the way people with NIDS were treated down on Earth... If she had stayed, Maria would have been just as likely to die at the hands of people as her disease. The decision he'd made for her had been the only sensible one. The one that had saved her life, so far.

But at least she would have been happy.

At that moment, the Professor made a promise to himself and to his granddaughter. If Project Shadow failed, then he would let Maria die in peace. He didn't want her to fade away strapped to a dozen machines in a cold, white room, a hundred miles from the warmth of the sun. He would try and try until the end, but if there was nothing left to be done, Maria would spend her final months on Earth.

Gerald bowed his head. First, he had to keep her safe for that long. "Maria, I wanted to talk to you before we visit Shadow."

Maria straightened, lost in excitement and barely paying attention as they started down the hall again. "What is it?"

The old man smoothed back his head, a reflex from his younger days when he'd had more hair. It was better to just get this over with. "I've noticed how attached you've become to Shadow, and... Maria, there's something you must understand. This experiment, he can't be your friend."

He held his hand up as Maria began to protest. "I know that you're lonely, but Shadow was not created for that reason. I made him for two reasons: to cure you, and to protect you."

Gerald hesitated, thinking of the experiment's true purpose. She was too young to truly understand what Shadow had been made for. "He is... dangerous. There are powers inside him that no natural creature has ever possessed before. Until I know he's under control, I can't even let him out of his testing chamber.

"He is also very, very unstable. Only one other experiment has ever survived out of containment, and it quickly became unmanageable. The same could happen to this one, or perhaps he will die, like all the others. I don't want you to have false hope."

Maria clutched her book to her chest and stared at the ground, her dreams of a new friend crushed. "But..."

"No buts," the Professor said sternly. "It isn't coded in his brain, Maria. He's a robot with a false face. He can't make choices on his own, he doesn't have free will... And he will *never* be your friend." Seeing her huge blue eyes holding back tears, his tone softened. "He's extremely dangerous, and I must keep you safe. Please understand this."

Her silent stare broke Gerald's heart, but he maintained his grim expression. Finally, she spoke, her stare falling to the floor. "Okay." Maria's small voice was even quieter than usual.

As they walked on, not speaking, a rebellious flame sparked inside the young girl. She just couldn't believe what her grandfather had said about Shadow. How could he truly have nothing inside him? Could it be that a creature who lived and breathed and dreamed possessed no soul, no free will, not even the capacity to untap these things?

And as simple as their first interaction was, Maria could sense the curiosity inside this strange creature. Just by the way he had looked at her, followed her movements, fixated on the pinnacle of life before him. She knew that she didn't imagine it.

She resolved then to ignore Gerald's command. She only had one friend aboard the ARK: Rei, a guard twelve years older than her. And she loved Rei, with all her heart, but that single friend couldn't erase the loneliness she felt every day.

Sure, everyone on the ship was nice to her, but they were only happy to listen to her chatter while they took diagnostics. Then they quickly ushered her out so they could focus on their work. The single other child on the ship was barely a year old. So the only people she could really talk to were Rei and Grandfather.

Maria was just lonely. She only wanted another friend - maybe that would be enough. And Gerald knew this, but he was scared, more scared than anything, that Maria would get hurt. That was something he could not allow, not when they were this close.

It wasn't much longer before they arrived at Shadow's containment chamber. The door was locked with a fingerprint scanner coded only to open to two people: Gerald and Maria Robotnik.

The clueless professor believed that his granddaughter was blind to the fact that she had access to every room on the ship, thinking her too innocent to sneak about. He had no idea that the girl had been running around at night since she could reach the scanners. Having a friend who happened to be a night guard did have its benefits.

The door chirped and slid open at Gerald's touch, revealing a small rectangular room. A simple chair sat before a panel with a plethora of confusing buttons. At the far end, a heavy metal door led into a huge testing chamber. One entire wall was made of thick glass and looked into that room.

Maria, cheering up as excitement flooded her again, rushed over to the glass barrier and peered in. The room on the other side was even more bare, with nothing except featureless white walls and blinding lights set into the ceiling within.

And there, in the middle of the floor, was Shadow.

He had a dazed look on his face, his red eyes unfocused as if he couldn't see very well. Now that he was out of the water, his fur was puffed up and his quills had sprung out, so he looked a bit less like a wet puppy. Now, too, he wore a thick pair of gloves with red and white shoes - probably provided by Gerald. The gold bands on his wrists glinted in the blinding light.

Shadow was on his knees, struggling to stand. With every attempt he fell down again, and his dazed look shifted to one of frustration.

Maria pressed into the wall, her breath fogging the glass. "Can he hear us?"

In response, Gerald reached for the microphone suspended on a wire from the ceiling and spoke into it. "Shadow."

He stopped and looked around, his eyes snapping into focus as he spotted Maria and her grandfather standing on the other side of the barrier. He stared intently at them, only vague recognition in his face.

He doesn't look dangerous, Maria thought defiantly, not daring to say it aloud.

"Shadow, can you hear me?" the Professor asked. In response, the black hedgehog nodded. "Good. Can you stand?"

Shadow attempted to get to his feet once more, but trembled and fell down with a grunt. The inside of his room had microphones, so they could hear every noise he made. He shook his head.

Gerald scribbled something onto a clipboard sitting on the panel. "You've been asleep for a long time, Shadow. You've never been outside your life support tank, so basic functions may be an issue, but you'll develop your strength soon enough. Let's try to talk now. Can you speak?"

Shadow didn't respond, eyes locked with the strangely familiar girl on the other side of the glass. He'd seen her before, he knew it... But where? He had never been anywhere but this place.

Blurry memories swam through his head: an old man always in his vision, throngs of people dressed in white staring in, and, before them all, a flash of gold...

This, my dear Maria, is the final result of Project Shadow...

His voice cracked like glass, but he managed to struggle out the word. "Ma... ria?"

It was like a switch flipping for both of them. He remembered her then. She was... different. All the others he had seen were weary and stiff, their dark eyes empty. She radiated energy and happiness, filled with animation, and yet, something sadder too.

She didn't belong here. That was it; that's what was wrong. She wasn't made to exist in a place like this. Maria was an oddity, an accident, never meant to live in the dead of space.

Shadow of course knew nowhere else, but even in his pseudo-infancy, he could sense the ship's walls crushing him. A thousand barriers between them and freedom. And he felt that, somehow, there may be a place without walls, somewhere that could release the free spirit caged inside the ARK.

Slowly, Gerald reached for the microphone, wondering if it was Maria he had to worry about. "Very good; I think that's enough for now. Try to rest, Shadow. I - "

Something in the Professor's pocket chirped insistently, interrupting him. He whipped out the small grey device and let the microphone fall back. A man appeared on the two-inch screen, pupils constricted in terror.

" - got to get down to Floor C, *now!* There was a leak of hydrogen sulfi - " The scientist was interrupted by an explosion that Gerald could hear from where he stood, and the call ended abruptly.

Grimacing, Gerald called the ARK's head pilot. "Red, seal off the vents, disable the elevators, and issue a Class B chemical breach on Floor C. And get some guards posted on the stairs; we can't have anyone going down there."

"Yessir." His voice came over the intercom. "Attention residents of the ARK, there has been a Class B Chemical Containment Breach. Please remain calm and return to your rooms immediately. All scientists on Floor C retreat to the chemical showers..."

The Professor sighed with perhaps a bit more dramatics than necessary. That was the third leak this year. *Amateurs...* "Maria, please stay here. I'll be right back." With that, he was gone.

The young girl was less than frightened. Crises of some form happened at least five times a year on the ARK, and while they were massively overblown, it was rare for any real damage to be done. Hopping up on the chair, she grabbed the microphone and pulled it down, settling next to the glass wall with her back to the panel.

"Hi, Shadow," she chirped into it, speaking as if they were old friends. "I suppose you must be a little dazed, huh? Are you feeling okay?"

Shadow nodded and managed, with much effort, to finally stand. Still weak from having been let out of the pod only recently, his legs shook, but he remained unsteadily on his feet.

"Hey, you did it! Once you're stronger, maybe I can break you out of there and show you the ARK." Maria laughed. "Just don't tell Grandfather I said that, okay?"

Shadow slowly and shakily made his way over to her, collapsing to his knees once he reached the glass. He tilted his head, as if wanting to ask a question but not being sure how to voice it.

Maria tilted her head in kind. "You don't talk much, do you? Oh well. I feel like I can kind of understand you even when you're not talking. I guess that's a little silly, isn't it? Grandfather says my mind wanders too much."

Aptly demonstrating her lack of focus, she switched topics abruptly. "Do you want me to read to you?" She pressed the cover against the glass then hugged it to her chest. "It's my favourite book in the world. It can be hard sometimes on the ARK, but reading is kind of like visiting another world... It makes it a little better."

Maria, nearly sailing off into daydreams, snapped back into reality. Shadow's face was blank as he struggled to process all the new words she was saying, but she smiled anyway. "I'll start from the beginning. If you don't understand something just tap on the glass,

okay? ' Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank...' "

They stayed that way for hours, pressed against the glass separating them, both too absorbed in that odd world to notice the passing of time. It was a short respite from the horrors that waited for them on that ship, a brief reprieve from what was to come. And time stopped for just a little while, giving them this, at least.

Shadow began to understand what Maria had said, about losing yourself in a different world, someone else's life. It could give you hope for a better future.

He didn't know that much about the world he'd been unwittingly born into, or the Earth that waited for him. But trapped inside that small white room, Shadow did know that he and Maria would be happier anywhere else in the world, even in a fantasy. So he leaned against the glass, letting the cadence of her small voice carry him somewhere far away.

And for just a moment in time, he was at peace.

Hope

Ever since I woke up, I've done nothing but dream. Even when I'm awake, I find myself consumed in my thoughts. Unable to control them, like I'm sleeping. Anyway, I'm all alone here, so what else can I do?

That kid... Maria. The girl with the bright smile. Even now, that's all I can remember: that piercing beam, her short hair flashing as it catches the light, pale blue eyes watching me as if I was the most important thing in the world.

Who is that girl? Is she... lonely? She must be, to talk to a thing like me.

She hasn't come for a while. The Professor visits every day, tries to get me to speak, but no, I won't talk without her. I have to see her again, have to understand: why me? How could she dance into my life, give me just a glimpse of something more than this place, only to breeze away again?

... Has she forgotten me?

Was she even real?

I've begun to wake up gasping for air, from some horrible nightmare. I never can remember it all, but Maria is always falling, falling, until she just slips away. Nothing left of her but void. Somehow, no matter how hard I try, I know that I can never catch her.

What has this girl done to me, to make me feel so panicked and out of control? When I first woke up here, nothing really mattered; I was happy, in an absent way. But she made me want more. This girl who I've only seen twice...

Maria... why am I so afraid of losing you?

One blue eye peeked around the door frame, examining the area. The long metal hall was shrouded in shadow, darkened in the faint blue lighting the ship switched to simulate night. Clutching her book tight to her chest, Maria stepped quietly into the hallway.

The coast was clear. Maria only had to hide from the night guards, and she'd be fine. The whole ship, shaped like a dome, was comprised of many different floors that each served their own purpose. This was the major research floor, and only Maria slept here.

Now, Maria thought, walking briskly and keeping her head down, though she knew her short stature was what would give her away. Which way was it?

Pausing, she looked around hopelessly. She only knew the rooms closest to where she slept well, as she was rarely allowed to wander further. Every hallway looked the same, and all she knew was that she had to pass by the outer edge of the ship to reach the place where Shadow was contained.

The only other thing she could remember was that it was in a remote part of this floor, in a hallway with a single door. But it would take a whole day to carefully explore just one part of the ship, even this close to the narrow top of the dome.

Maria, deep in her thoughts, didn't notice the person in front of her until she rammed into him. The girl gasped and tipped backwards, but strong arms grabbed her and pulled her back.

"L-let go of me! Let go!" Maria cried, pounding on the stomach of the assailant.

He released his hold on her, and this time Maria did fall. She landed hard on her back, unable to get away, and looked up in terror at the face of her attacker. Her expression changed.

"... Rei?"

"Geez, Maria," the guard groaned, rubbing his bruised stomach. "I catch you and this is the thanks I get. Have you been working out? That's quite the punch."

Maria flushed, sitting up. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't know it was you! I thought you were..." She trailed off, her face suddenly going dark.

Her stormy expression wasn't lost on the older man. "Thought I was who?"

"Um - no one. I didn't mean anyone in particular." Maria smiled nervously.

Rei wasn't buying it. He offered a hand and pulled her to her feet. "I wish I was stationed on this floor every night," he said, shaking his head. "You're really starting to scare me."

"What do you mean?" Fear began to creep its way into Maria, but she forced it back, keeping her expression blank. Quickly she scurried over to the book that had flown out of her hands.

"It's just..." Rei narrowed his dirty green eyes. "You've been acting strange for a while now. Jumping every time someone comes up behind you, talking even less than usual... I know you're usually shy, but you seem... different. Is something going on?"

Maria stared at the ground and began to walk beside her friend. "It's..." She looked up at him, but he was gazing down the hall, keeping an eye out for other guards. Rei, who was so nice to her, and *always* listened to her...

But no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't choke the words out. Maria plastered another smile on her face. "It's nothing. I'm alright, Rei. Please believe me."

Rei humphed, a slow grin crossing his face. "No can do, kiddo. I'll just have to stay annoyingly close by your side and keep an eye on you."

"Wha - no way! You can't do that!"

"You going to stop me?" The guard grinned and brushed his wild brown hair out of his eyes, laughing at Maria's indignant look.

"Where are you off to, anyway?"

Maria crossed her arms, pouting. "It's a secret."

"Oh really? So, what's the new experiment like?"

"Shadow's really nice! I can't wait to get to know him better!" Maria's smile faded when she saw the smug grin on her friend's face. "W-wait, I was just joking!"

Rei snickered. "I knew it!" he cried, raising an arm in triumph.

The moment, however, was soon over as his face clouded over with concern. "You know, Maria, I've overheard all the scientists talking about the power this thing possesses... I'm sorry for being as overbearing as the Professor, but I can't help but worry." He glanced at her. "I don't know if that's something you should be messing with."

Rei was somewhat of an enabler for Maria's mischief - he'd made it his job to keep an eye on her, not to force her to follow curfew - but this was pushing it. He wasn't telling her no yet, but the look on his face made it clear that he'd be dragging her back to her room if she didn't do a good job convincing him.

Maria stared at the metal-plated floor; the shadows, one tall and one short, that the two cast. They were so very different, her and Rei, and yet they still came together somehow. Even through the age gap, the very different lives they had led, and their wildly varying personalities, they were still friends.

And, as young as she was, she still remembered the dark days, before Rei, when she didn't have even the smallest sliver of hope left inside her.

Once she'd grown old enough to start understanding her situation, everything had started going downhill. For a long time, she even gave up on going to Earth. But Rei had appeared just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, and then...

"You see, Rei," said Maria, a look of pure sincerity on her face, "I remember what it was like to be alone. Once, I didn't have any friends at all."

At that the man's face darkened. Maria had quickly become like a little sister to him, and the thought of her alone made him want to punch all the doctors who ignored her, some even calling her a nuisance.

As they crossed near the windows, Maria looked out. A dark hole had taken Earth's place, leaving only the far reaches of the universe. But the silver moon, whole and beautiful, was just visible.

"I'm still lonely, you know," she said honestly, placing a hand on the cold glass. "But even having just one friend helped me be hopeful again, so I want to keep trying to give Shadow that too. And you know what Grandfather always says." Maria smiled brightly. "Fall down seven times, get up eight. Never give up."

The young girl pulled herself away from the window and gazed into her friend's grey-green eyes, her own narrowing. "I don't want anyone to feel like I did. Nobody should ever be alone, Rei. Nobody."

Rei was taken off guard by the fiery determination radiating off her. He'd always thought of her as a shy, weak girl, someone who needed protection. But maybe her frail body betrayed her. Maybe she had a stronger will than he'd thought.

"You're pretty hard to argue with," Rei said slowly. *Outsmarted by a seven-year-old.* "Alright then. I guess you get the Rei Seal of Approval."

"I wasn't asking for your permission!"

Rei tapped her on the head. "I bet you'd change your tune if I threatened to tell Granddaddy Robotnik about your nightly escapades."

The young girl fumed silently, until Rei swooped in and picked her up. She yelped and kicked him. "Put me down!"

"I shall escort you to your destination, milady," Rei playfully mocked, bowing for effect.

"I can walk there myself!" Maria struggled, but was unable to break free of his strong grip.

The guard ignored her, an arrogant smirk on his face as he ran through the halls. With how little she weighed, he wondered if her bones were made of glass. She seemed as light as a baby bird.

Soon, the pair arrived at their destination, and Maria was deposited on the ground with a flourish. Rei stretched and motioned to go, leaving the girl at the door.

"I've got to get back to my patrols, before ol' Jack reports me for slacking off again. Good luck with your new BFF," the man said with a small salute, sauntering off down the hall. He turned back to her suddenly, his eyes darkening. "And Maria... Be careful. Please."

Maria smiled gently. She knew she couldn't put his fears to rest, but she could try. "Don't worry about me, Rei. I'll be fine. It's not like I'm letting him out." Yet.

The guard didn't respond, just walked off. He made plans to round back this way in an hour or so to check on her. Much like Gerald, he didn't care about anything but Maria now. He'd felt stripped of humanity long ago - there had been nothing left on Earth for him, so he'd come here.

He hadn't expected to find much here, but he had found her. And Maria had given him something back. Joy, curiosity, love. Humanity.

Checking on her was the least he could do, a tiny part to play in making sure she was safe.

Maria didn't know it, but she was intertwined with more lives than she thought.

The scanner chimed as it registered her fingerprints, and the door slid silently open. The lights were off, but Maria had thought to pocket a reading light in her sky blue pajamas. With a flick of a switch, the little bulb snapped on.

She shone it in and was surprised to find Shadow already there, only a few feet away from the glass. His red eyes glittered in the light. Though startled, she quickly climbed up on the stool in front of the metal panel and grabbed the microphone.

"Hi, Shadow," she said softly, plopping down with her back against the panel again. "Have you forgotten me already?"

The hedgehog shook his head quickly, sitting next to the glass. "I thought you forgot me," he said carefully. His voice was fuller now, not as scratchy and cracked as it had been before, but speaking still seemed difficult.

Maria looked sadly down at the book on her lap. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to visit you. Grandfather's been up late in the lab every night this whole week. I kept falling asleep."

The hedgehog was not particularly skilled at picking up on implications, but he understood that Maria hadn't been allowed to come here. "Does he..." Shadow hesitated. "... not trust me?"

Maria gripped the book so tightly that her knuckles turned white, the hand that held the light shaking. The more she thought about it, the more upset Gerald's actions made her. She knew he considered Shadow to be inhuman - not because of him being a Faunas. Gerald believed the hedgehog couldn't possibly have higher brain functions than a simple robot.

But Shadow wasn't just some AI, like the computer that controlled the ship. He wasn't just some artificial creature without feelings! How could he not see that?

"Maria?" Shadow asked, a layer of concern in his voice.

The girl relaxed her grip, her hand stilling. "He thinks you're dangerous. That you'll hurt me. But I don't believe it."

Shadow looked down, pulling one knee to his chest. That was one thing Gerald had already made sure to instill in him. "You should."

"Why?"

"I *am* dangerous." To demonstrate, a small red ball of energy began to form in his cupped hand, quickly growing larger as it gathered immense strength. Maria's pocket light seemed to dim, as if that unnatural power was sucking all the life out of the room.

The young girl stared at the energy crackling violently before her. She knew enough about chaos to understand that a single drop of such a force coming in contact with her would result in her quick demise. And Shadow could use it without seemingly any exertion at all. Yet...

"Would you hit me with that?" she asked, her face set.

"I..." The blood-red energy flickered and Shadow stared at her. What he would do with his powers... Somehow, that had never occurred to him. Gerald had told him that simply possessing these abilities would lead him to hurt someone if he was not kept under control.

"Would you?" Maria pressed.

Shadow's chaos ball dissipated, plunging them into darkness again. "Of course not."

The young girl beamed triumphantly. "Then you can't hurt me."

The hedgehog gazed at the ground. Maria's views were simplistic, but maybe there was a truth to them. Maybe. But after the Professor had told him of the raw power coursing through his veins, how easily he could hurt people, he couldn't even trust himself.

Shadow looked at the girl on the other side of the glass. Gerald had told him that he was a dangerous liability, but she seemed to be saying that there was more to it than that. She wasn't afraid of him at all, but was that really just naivete?

Whether she understood his powers or not, she was still here, trying to be his friend. Maybe, for now, that was enough. He'd just have to see who was right.

Life went on in the ARK. Shadow woke to the same blinding lights every day, went through various physical and mental exercises with Gerald. He excelled at everything, but always his mind was elsewhere, on Maria. He'd sleep with one ear pricked until the door would slide open and her exhausted, smiling face was peering inside. And if she didn't come, then he waited for tomorrow to bring her.

This was their life for weeks, the two friends always separated by five inches of bulletproof glass, only able to hear each other through the static of speakers.

But Maria had other plans. The door to Shadow's cell was locked, not just with a fingerprint scanner, but with a special keycard. And she knew that her grandfather kept copies of that keycard in his desk.

Gerald's office was on the top, narrowest part of the ARK's dome. He usually slept up there, so there was only one time that Maria could break in: while he was in the lab during the day. Of course she needed authorization to go to that floor, but with Gerald's paranoia, she had clearance everywhere.

Maria headed through the hallways, trying to look natural and sharply watching for any sign of a patrolling guard or scientist. Everyone was under strict orders to keep little Maria in her room and out of trouble, but they usually let her wander without bothering her during the day.

Luckily, all the scientists were too busy in the labs to notice her entering the elevator. Her prints were accepted with a beep and the lift ascended.

The doors opened and she entered the room. It was like stepping into another world up here. The usual cold metal of the ship was replaced by warmly-coloured wooden panels, with a dead furnace, a small bookshelf, and a grand desk on the opposite wall.

There were no windows, which suited Gerald, who didn't want to be reminded of Earth. Maria was not the only one who missed her true home.

The Professor didn't bother locking his drawers, so the young girl rifled through them freely. She often found lots of treasures there, which she longed to keep but was forced to return: Pictures of her as a baby with her parents; papers talking about her in intricate detail; long, rambling essays with words too big for her to understand about her grandfather's latest experiment; relics and toys and random items from the past.

But she had to focus as she rifled through the desk. Keycard, keycard, keycard... There it was! She pocketed the hard blue plastic, making sure to rearrange the neat drawer back to what it had been. But as she did, a slip of paper with a short string of numbers inked on it came loose.

She realized what it was right away, and her gaze turned to the big black safe in the corner. Slowly, in awe, she crawled across the soft rug on the floor and punched the code in. The safe door swung open to reveal...

Maria tilted her head. A shotgun? Her body shivered in excitement as she realized how dangerous this was. Guns were things she had read about and seen pictures of in books, even holstered on Rei's belt, but was never allowed to touch. She reached in and pulled it out, cradling the cold firearm in her lap. It was bigger than she was.

She ran her fingers along the black metal, fingering the trigger and touching the designs carved in. Examining the muzzle, she noticed something strange. Some sort of stain, like liquid had been splashed over it, covering the whole front half of the gun.

Just then Maria heard a beep and the sound of the elevator rising. *Uh oh*, was all she had time to think, before the doors slid open and she saw her grandfather standing behind them.

He gasped in horror as his eyes fell on her. "Maria!" She cringed, his panicked voice sharper than she'd ever heard it. Gerald crossed the distance in a single stride and snapped the gun out of her hands. "What are you doing with this?!" The old man, trembling, rushed to put the weapon away.

Maria looked at her fingers. She looked at the stains on the gun as it disappeared into the safe again, the door slammed shut by Gerald's shaking hands. And she knew. She'd been listening to the whispers since she was little. She wasn't stupid.

"It's the gun," Maria said, her voice set as she knew she was right. "The gun my daddy shot himself with. Isn't it?"

Gerald stiffened and leaned against the safe, still turned away. He exhaled, a tremor running down his whole body. "Who told you about your father?"

"You. The guards. The scientists. You said it over my head and I listened."

Gerald sighed, all his worries contained in that one breath. Maria was a smart child; he should have known better. "Yes. That's the

gun."

Maria curled up into herself and thought about this for a minute, while Gerald went and sat down at his chair in front of the fireplace, leaning his head in shaking hands. This was a talk he was hoping to avoid for now. Her parents' deaths in general, but her father's especially.

"Why?" Maria finally asked, crawling up to the fire Gerald had lit. "Why did he do that?"

"Because..." The Professor frowned. How to explain suicide to a child, when he could barely understand the motivations himself? "Well, when your mother gave birth to you, she was very sick with the same illness you have. And she died right away. After that, your father..."

He shuddered, shedding a tear for his long-dead son, which he quickly wiped away. "Most babies with NIDS don't live for very long. You weren't doing well. I suppose... he thought he had nothing to live for. He thought you were going to die."

"But I didn't. I won't!" Maria protested.

"I hope not, Little Alice," Gerald said wearily, pulling his granddaughter onto his lap. "This is why I never let you touch a weapon. I'm just afraid... if you ever lost hope..." He looked at Maria's wide, innocent eyes, not understanding. Those eyes were filled with life, but for how long?

He patted her head, mussing the pale gold strands. "There's always hope."

"Shadow! Shadow, wake up! I got it!"

The aforementioned hedgehog squinted and rubbed his eyes, trying to follow the piece of plastic she was waving wildly about. She really

had to stop shining that light in his face. "What is that?"

"The keycard!" Maria was bouncing on her heels in her excitement. "Shadow... you can come out!"

Shadow's eyes widened. "You mean... out there? With you?" His mind, having never left this room, could barely comprehend it.

"Yup!" Maria ran off to slot the card before Shadow could say anything else. "Stand back!" she called in as the door swung open.

And there they were, no more barriers left between them. They stood before each other, and yet it was like they still had that wall of glass separating them. Neither were sure what to do.

But Maria shattered the wall by running forward and embracing him in a hug. Shadow, rather unversed on the methods of human affection, felt more than a little awkward. But even so, he mirrored her, returning the hug. She was... warm. Warmer than that cold, empty room - the first other life he'd ever had contact with.

Pulling away, Maria grinned and took his hand, tugging him along. "Come on, I'll show you the ARK!"

The pair slipped into the dark hallway as Shadow looked around in wonder at the huge rooms and long corridors. Sure, it was all very similar to where he had been interred, metal plating and white floors, but at least it was somewhere else. He squeezed her hand, as if he could barely believe it was really there.

As they passed by one of the windows, that's when he really got his first glimpse at the outside world. That dark expanse, dotted with white lights and otherworldly swirling colours... He had known the words for stars and galaxies, but he had never, ever been able to imagine them.

"We can't go that many places," Maria explained in a hushed voice, pulling Shadow out of his reverie. "The elevators are locked down at

night and guards are posted at the stairs."

She tapped the window looking into a darkened lab. "This is the one of the laboratory wings, where scientists do experiments. It's mostly the biological stuff. Chemicals are down below us, and weapons and explosives and stuff below that..."

Maria rambled on about the floors of the ARK for a bit, and Shadow happily listened, hungry for information about his prison. But suddenly, Maria stopped, pulling Shadow along the wall. She peered around a corner.

"There's a guard there," she whispered. "We have to go a different way. Come on."

Shadow and Maria silently ran down the hallway. Maria was careful, always on the lookout for guards, and Shadow used his better hearing to guide them. There seemed to be someone on every corner, but eventually they managed to make it to Maria's room.

Maria slammed the button on the wall and exhaled as the door closed behind them. More was at stake than usual. If anyone caught them... she'd probably never see Shadow again. That hadn't really occurred to her when she'd first thought up this plan. Shaking, she tried to calm herself and flicked the lights on, going to sit on her bed.

"We should take a break for a minute," she said. "Then I'll show you my favourite spot on the ship."

"This is your room?" Shadow sat down on the plush blue carpet in front of the bed and looked around.

It was certainly cozier than his. It didn't have very much in it - Maria always picked up her books and toys, so it looked painfully sterile and bare - but there was a touch of personality to it. Better than an empty white room, anyway.

Standing, he walked over and looked at the books and trinkets on her shelves. Cards with silly-looking characters or pictures of odd landscapes, saying, "Get well soon, Maria", or "Merry Christmas from the United Federation". Strange water-filled balls with carvings in them. Small statues of mythical creatures. Alien presents from a world she'd never known.

Carefully, he picked up a small octagonal box. It was made of silver and had intricate patterns carved in the side. He didn't recognize much of anything here, but the gleaming object had caught his eye. "What is this?"

Maria hopped off the bed and padded over. "It's a music box. Grandfather found it buried in his old stuff, good as new, and gave it to me. Twist the handle and open it," she said in a hushed voice.

Shadow obliged and the room filled instantly with the quiet but clear notes of a beautiful song, unlike any other sound he'd heard. It was light-hearted and sweet, but sad, somehow. Like a lonely lullaby.

The last note played and the song wound to a stop. The room was quiet for a moment, before Shadow closed the box with a click and set it gently back down. A dictionary's worth of words had been programmed into his brain, so he knew what music was, but this was far beyond that basic comprehension.

Before either of them could break the spell, the door beeped and slid open. They both tensed, Shadow stepping back as instinct told him to hide, but it was too late. Someone stepped in from the darkness, a look of terror on his face. He was dressed in the navy blue of a guard's outfit, hand already on his gun.

As his face entered the light, Maria relaxed. "Rei... I'm so glad it's you."

But Rei didn't calm down, his gaze fixed on Shadow with equal parts wonder and shock. "Maria... You let the experiment out?!"

Shadow glared at him, but Maria stepped in front of Shadow protectively. "He has a name."

"So what? Do you realize what he could do to you? They way everyone was talking... He could kill everyone on this ship without even trying!" Rei grabbed Maria to pull her away, but she snapped her arm back, startling him.

"I don't believe Shadow could hurt anyone," she said, voice steely. She might have been timid, but when the time called for it, Maria could possess a surprising amount of resolve. "Just because of what he is... that doesn't make him bad! It's not his fault for being born!"

To everyone's surprise, Shadow himself spoke up. "I might have these powers..." He remembered what Maria had told him, that what he did was up to him. "... But that doesn't mean I have any intention of hurting anyone with them. You have a gun, are you going to shoot somebody?"

Rei stared at Shadow. He had expected something like the Biolizard, which he'd been unfortunate enough to witness with his own eyes. But this soft-spoken, rational creature? Never.

After a moment, he relaxed slightly. He still wasn't sure about this Faunas, but then, if he wanted to harm Maria, he'd had ample opportunity.

Still, walking into her room and seeing a dangerous experiment roaming free had been a bit startling. "I just don't want anyone to get hurt."

Seeing him let his guard down, Maria perked up. "We won't get hurt," she chirped, all traces of that unusual seriousness vanished. "Come on, you can come with us."

The optimistic girl took both their hands and led them into the hall, despite the guard's lingering tension. If Maria noticed, she pointedly ignored it.

Rei risked a glance at Shadow as they walked. His eyes were always fixed determinedly ahead, but he was relaxed. The young guard knew what people who had cruel intentions were like. They were deadly calm, like Shadow, but alert and high-strung, their eyes snapping around and looking for any threats, any opportunity.

If he had any desire to hurt Maria, he would be more on edge. But this Faunas seemed... normal enough, and Maria seemed to trust him. Maybe he'd overreacted after all. He'd wait and see.

Finally they reached their destination: a small storage room, so tiny that the three of them could barely fit in there. It was devoid of any furnishing except for a rack of cleaning supplies and a couple of wooden boxes stacked before a wide window. There were some blankets and pillows on the boxes, and that was all.

Maria hopped onto a crate, making herself comfortable. "See, Shadow? This is my favourite place. It's a little lonely here, but it's nice when I need to get away from everyone."

"Or when you want to hide from me," Rei quipped, already somewhat back to his old self.

"If you really do start staying annoyingly close then I will hide from you!"

Rei laughed, leaning back in a corner and keeping an eye on Shadow. He had to admit, the Faunas was quiet, but he didn't sense any ill intention from him. Though he was clearly perplexed by Maria's gestures, he allowed her to take his hand and pull him along or chatter at him without any signs of irritation. That was more than could be said for some of her interactions with doctors that he'd witnessed.

He wasn't exactly sure he wanted to leave them alone together, but as it turned out, he didn't have much of a choice. The man's smile faded as he checked his watch. "Sh - uh, crap. I'm supposed to meet up with Jack in 10 minutes." He pushed himself off the wall. "You two

okay? Don't forget that the janitor comes by around 2, and it's already 12:30."

Maria rolled her eyes, a habit the normally respectful girl had picked up from Rei. "I've been coming here since I was little, you know."

Rei tweaked her nose. "You are little."

Maria flushed and glared at him. "You are *super* annoying, I mean it!"

The older man, suddenly dead serious, ignored her and crouched down before Shadow, meeting his eyes. "Shadow, I'm not always going to be around to keep Maria safe."

"Safe from what?!" Maria interjected.

"So whenever I'm not able to look after her, you'll have to take my place. Can you promise to protect Maria, no matter what?" Despite the teasing note that lingered behind his words, his face was sober.

The hedgehog raised an eyebrow, having only a faint clue what in the world this man was on about, but responded sincerely. "I promise."

"Good!" Rei ruffled Shadow's fur, much to his indignation, and stood up.

"Don't touch me," Shadow muttered with a grimace, smoothing back his head.

Rei laughed and raised his hand. "Arrivederci, children." And with that he sailed off.

The black hedgehog, still frowning, pulled himself onto the box next to Maria. "I don't like him."

Maria giggled. "You'll get used to his teasing." Face brightening, she tapped on the window. "This is what I came here to show you. Look..."

Shadow looked, and awe filled him. From this part of the ARK, the galaxy looked even more beautiful than it had before. He might have lived inside a cage, but it was truly the best place to be imprisoned, out here in the midst of all those specks of light that pierced the darkness.

People in cities on Earth lamented for the hazy, starless sky. But here, Maria and Shadow could gaze upon a million twinkling lights, the swirl of distant galaxies, the shadow of the silvery moon, and the grand blue Earth in the far beyond.

"What is that?" Shadow asked, pointing to the vast planet.

Maria's eyes hazed over and she pressed against the windowsill, smiling dreamily. "It's Earth. Isn't it beautiful? I'm going to go there someday."

Shadow leaned his head on his hand. "What's so good about it?"

"Everything," the girl began, breathless with excitement. "They have seasons there... That means for a quarter of the year, it's colder or warmer and all the plants look different. And it has something called weather, which means water or snow falls from the sky! Plus they have parks and cities and towns and farms and stores and houses... And so many people to live in them..."

She stopped, seeing Shadow looking at her in confusion as he tried to process all these new concepts. "I guess what I'm saying is that every day is... different. You know what I mean? Here, you wake up in the same place, do the same things, go to sleep again..." Her cheerful expression broke for a moment, reminded of this. "But I want to be somewhere new every day."

Shadow didn't know much about the world, but he knew that this "Earth" place certainly sounded more interesting than the ARK. He felt the same urge that Maria did, the need to just... go. Two wandering spirits stuck in a place of close hallways and walls.

"I don't know what I can do, but..." Shadow glanced at her, nodding as he made his decision. "I'll help you get there, Maria." For some reason, that promise just felt right. He had no idea how he could get them to that strange blue orb, but if there was anything he could do, he had to try.

"Really?" Maria beamed, but her smile fell. "I can't just leave, though. Shadow... I'm sick. If I go to Earth, I'll die."

Shadow looked down, remembering what the Professor had briefly told him. That he couldn't ever get sick, and maybe, they could use him to give that ability to other people. People like Maria. "I'm supposed to make you better, right?"

"Yeah... but Grandfather doesn't know how to use your blood to make a cure. It's different from every other type, so we can't just give me the..." She paused, struggling to recall it. "The antibodies, the things that kill viruses and stuff, in your blood. Grandfather said if I had the wrong blood put in me it would kill me from the inside out."

Shadow stared at the Earth again, visible beyond their reflections. He didn't have a full grasp of what was wrong with her, but he could sense Maria's desperation... So close to being cured, yet so far.

"I think the Professor can do it," Shadow said resolutely. "So when you're better, I'll take you there. I swear, no matter what, I'll get you to Earth."

Moved by this small speech, Maria had to wipe tears from her eyes. She had never harboured any more than a distant dream of reaching Earth, but the fierce determination in Shadow's voice made her truly believe it.

"Thank you, Shadow," she whispered.

All was quiet for a half hour, the two gazing out the window in peaceful silence. But then, a shooting star streaked through the sky,

into the atmosphere, burning up in a beautiful flame of glory as it faded into Earth's blue waters.

"Shooting star. Wish on it, Shadow," Maria murmured. She yawned, nearly falling asleep.

"Why?"

"Wishes are eternal..." Her voice was barely a whisper. "Make a wish and somehow, someday... maybe not in the way you expect... it'll come true." Her eyes shut as she drifted off into the peace of sleep.

Normally Shadow would have thought something like that was silly at best. He was logical, not a dreamer. That was just his nature.

But, even though a part of him knew it was ridiculous, for the sake of Maria, he did what she said. Right now, Maria getting better was no more than a dream. But if they wished, and if they kept trying... Maybe she could make it to Earth. That was something he had to believe.

I wish... I wish that Maria will go to Earth...

If only everything could happen the way you expected.

Live

A/N:

Trigger warning [Spoilers, skip if unneeded]: This chapter contains heavy implications of sexual abuse. If you find this subject uncomfortable, please skip the first and third scenes.

I can hear it. The monster, the demon. It's coming for me again.

Go away. Go away. Go away.

Just close your eyes... It'll be over soon, and the monster will go away. It always ends eventually. It's okay... it's okay.

It's touching me with its cold, slimy claws.

I can't move.

Think of Rei. Think of Shadow. They'd save you, if they could. They'd never... they'd never let this happen. They promised that they would keep you safe from things that want to hurt you. It doesn't matter, if they don't know... But it helps, right?

I wish I could tell them about the demon that creeps in my room, does... things to me. But what if they didn't believe me? What if they don't understand? No, they wouldn't. Grandfather will be mad at me if I tell. He'll be mad, he'll be...

The monster is looming. It smiles with sharp, white teeth.

Don't look! Look at the lights on the vitals monitor. Aren't they pretty? Blinking like the fireflies on Earth.

It's crushing me.

You're on Earth. You're on Earth. Watch the fireflies.

It hurts.

Please stop.

Please.

Maria yawned, flopping onto her back. The table she lay on was cold and hard, but she could sleep anywhere lately. Some nights, she made it back just at the stroke of 6:00 wakeup. Gerald of course let her sleep in, but if she wasn't up by 10:00 he would come in to rouse her himself.

"Rei, what are we doing here?" Maria's voice was barely intelligible through her gaping yawn.

"Here" was a windowless side room to one of the laboratories, where no one could peer in and see their antics. But they usually headed to Maria's closet or sometimes walked around the halls, talking in hushed voices.

Shadow sat next to Maria, his legs crossed as he distastefully examined a chemical stain on the table. "This place doesn't seem like much fun."

"Lighten up, Shads," Rei, leaning against the far wall, retorted. "You don't think *anything* is fun."

"Don't call me that," Shadow grumbled. The two had been feuding since they'd met, much to Maria's amusement.

The girl sat up and poked his side, making him flinch. "He's right, Shadow. You should relax a little."

Shadow humphed. "Hard to relax when we've got guards on our tails at every turn."

"We're safe here," Rei said. His face darkened. "Plus, I didn't bring you here to have fun."

Maria cocked her head. "What for, then?"

The guard took out his gun and Shadow tensed, but Maria's hand on his placated him. "I'm teaching you to shoot."

"Grandfather says I can never touch a weapon," Maria said warily. After her last stunt, if he caught her with a gun again, he'd probably actually kill her.

"I'm not interested in what the old geezer thinks," Rei scoffed. His eyes narrowed and the muddy green irises turned a vicious black. "Not everyone in the world has good intentions, Maria, not even on Earth. You might have me and Shadow, but if you're ever on your own... you can't always run away."

Maria's eyes widened and she looked at Shadow, but he said nothing. Her safety was top priority to him, so as much as he disliked the idea of her having to defend herself from whatever came, he could hardly disagree. Reluctantly, Maria slid off the table and timidly approached Rei, who held out the gun to her.

The small girl hesitantly reached out and took it, nearly dropping it from the weight. She struggled even to hold the small pistol with her two shaking hands.

"Relax, Maria. You're not going to be shooting it. That'd attract every guard on this floor," Rei said, holding back a smile at the girl's pitiful look. This might have been serious, but that didn't mean he couldn't get some amusement out of it.

He took it from her and showed her the side. "This is the safety." He flicked the switch and showed her before pushing it back. "You see the red, that means it's ready to fire. To reload it, press this button, take a loaded magazine, and slide it in. Easy."

Maria did not think it was easy, but she said nothing as she watched Rei show her how to use the gun.

"Now," he gave it back to her, catching her before she toppled forward from the weight, "hold it like this, and look through those lines there... That's where you're aiming."

He observed the girl with a critical eye and held her arms steady. "If the time comes, you can't be shaking like that. Don't think about it, Maria. Just do it. One second is all it takes..." He mimed squeezing the trigger. "And it's over. But in that same amount of time, the person could shoot you. You *can't* hesitate."

Maria dropped her hands and looked at the ground. "I could never hurt anybody."

Rei narrowed his eyes. "You can't say that. No matter what, you can't believe that. If you won't save yourself, then imagine if someone else was in danger. If you stood by and did nothing... that's almost as bad as pulling the trigger on them yourself."

Shadow looked on silently, an unfounded respect for Rei in his eyes. It was the hard truth, but it was the truth. As much as Gerald hated it, there might be a day where Maria had no one but herself to rely on. He'd keep her safe from whatever lay out there for as long as he could, but even in his limited days, Shadow knew that things don't always go the way you want them to.

Admittedly, the chances of a seven-year-old having to go up against someone who was actually trying to kill her were rather slim, but in the end, Rei wasn't telling her this for *now*. But for a time when, maybe, he wouldn't be around anymore.

Maria was staring at him, obviously confused. Right now, she was too young to understand what he meant. But maybe someday these words could help her.

Rei gently took the gun from her, setting it on the table, and crouched down. His small green eyes met her wide blue ones as he placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. "The most important thing, Maria... If you pull that trigger, no matter what your intentions are, you have to mean it. We can't regret that decision, ever. Whether the person was innocent or not... whether they deserved it... whether you kill or injure them... All that doesn't matter. What matters is that you *live*."

He let go of her and she stumbled back. Before Rei could even stand she had zipped back to the table. But the guard wasn't done.

He holstered the gun and headed to the door. Maria knew he could only stay with them for short bursts before heading back to the patrols, and he often slipped out unnoticed only to catch up later.

So she assumed he would leave without a word, but at the last moment, the guard stopped at the door. "You have to live, Maria," Rei said, his hand still on the gun. "Even if it means going against your kind nature... Even if you have to throw away your humanity... You have to live."

And he was gone.

He hasn't come in a long time.

He never came after 12. That was a blessing for Maria. She always knew when it was safe to retreat to the protection of her friends. If he came when she was gone, there would be trouble, so she just had to wait. Sitting up, she reached forward and pressed a button on the wall, lighting up a panel.

11:39.

"I'm so sorry, I fell asleep," she would say the next day, if he came. That hadn't happened in a long time, though. Months, maybe. She tried not to think about it.

Maria pulled the covers up to her chin as she stared at the blank white ceiling. *Maybe he'll never come back.*

Unlikely. But she could hope, right? She couldn't even understand it, but this was normalcy for her now. It was sad that such a thing was just a part of life to her, a common, expected, unavoidable pain like stubbing her toe or getting a headache. And for a long time, she'd just ignored it, tried to go on even though it felt wrong.

But lately, she'd been thinking more.

She tried to relax, rolling over onto her side and staring at the vitals monitor, but every muscle in her body was tensed. The machine beeped quickly in time with her pounding heart. She thought to herself, did Grandfather go over the records the next day and notice her heart rate spiking? Did he wonder why?

The girl stiffened and pulled the blanket over her head when she heard footsteps outside her door. Despite her best efforts to be brave, tears leaked out of her eyes, quickly soaking the pillow. A sob escaped her and she curled up into herself.

She had only cried once. Just once. After that she remained impassive; dead still, like a corpse. She never moved a single muscle until it was over. But finally, she had snapped.

The door slid open and Maria wailed into her pillow. She couldn't stop it no matter how hard she tried, but she couldn't just take it anymore, either.

"Maria?" The voice was warm, filled with fear and concern. Not gruff and deep, a monster's voice.

The girl sat up from beneath the covers, tears still streaming down her face. "R-Rei?"

It was dark, but Maria could see the man's eyes widen when he took in her distraught state. Quickly, he crossed the room and crouched

by the bed. "I just came to make sure you were still awake. Maria? What's the matter?"

Maria sniffled. And always, the truth got stuck in her throat. "I... I had a nightmare."

"Rough dream." He patted her gently on the back. "You probably should rest a little longer. Tell me about it when you get up, okay?"

The young girl stared up at his kind face, creased with worry for her. How could it be that there could be such sweet people in the world, and yet terrible ones as well?

He mussed her hair as he stood and went to move away, but Maria reached out and grabbed his sleeve. Tears began to prick at her eyes again, but her voice was steady. "Stay."

"If Jack reports me for missing the hourly meet-up one more time, I'll be moved to another floor. You know that." His voice was soft, but firm. "Plus, the Professor knows that I spend time with you when I'm off shift. It won't take him long to put two and two together."

Maria's tears welled up and she choked out a sob. "Please. Stay."

He gently removed her hand and patted her head one more time. "I'll check on you in just a little bit, okay? Then you can tell me all about the nightmare creatures. Hang in there."

And Maria was alone.

But not for long.

11:50. She checked and checked, counting down. Promising herself, if she just made it through this minute, five minutes, ten minutes, she'd be okay. But these pacts were never enough.

Footsteps, again. "Rei?" she whispered into the darkness, sitting up. It was only false hope; she knew it often took him thirty minutes to

make a rotation and safely get back to her without alerting the other guards of his truancy.

The metal door slid open and she shrank back into the covers. The silhouette in the doorway was spindly, short. Rei wasn't that muscular, but his tall, trained form was hardly interchangeable with that of a flimsy scientist or doctor.

"You're awake." The frame stilled in the doorway. On his shadow, she could only see the glint of blue lights pressed against glass.

His voice, deeper, alien, only confirmed it. Maria shuddered and pressed against the cold wall, wishing she could meld into it, where he couldn't touch her.

He stepped over to the bed, his form looming over her. It was too dark to see his expression; his white coat just caught the faint light of the vitals monitor. Reaching out, he wiped the tears from her face, ignoring her flinch. "Don't cry."

Maria shrank away, pushing herself into the metal until she could feel its chill seeping into her skin. He didn't usually say anything, just came in and got it over with. Always with a hazy and distant look in his eyes, like he was elsewhere.

She hated his voice. The clarity in it was chilling. At least, when he said nothing, she could pretend he wasn't human.

The doctor reached out to cup her face in his hands. His glasses flashed as he leaned forward. "You're so pretty, Marie, even when you're making that face..."

When she smacked his hand away, it was enough to stun him for several seconds. Rebellion was unusual. She never fought back. And yet, the fiery glare in her eyes made her seem for a moment much different person than he thought she was. "I don't want to!"

He stared at her. In the weak lighting, his face looked like a spell had been broken. "What?"

"I don't..." She pulled the covers tight to her chest. It was the best shield she had. "I don't want to anymore."

For a moment, he was silent, and he wondered if he would listen. If he just got up, left, and never came back... That was all she wanted. She wouldn't have to tell Grandfather or Rei. She could just go on and pretend it never happened.

Then he spoke, all the traces of warmth gone from his voice. "Just be quiet." In one swift motion he pushed her, covering her mouth before she could cry out.

Maria, a spark of defiance entering her for the first time, began to thrash and bite down on his hand. But she was soon immobilized as his legs pinned her down. No matter how hard she fought, she was a small child, weaker than most, and he was an adult. All the determination in the world could do nothing for that.

"Stop fighting me!" he said, grunting as she squirmed out of his grasp again. "It'll be easier for us both if you just stop!"

Again, that clarity on his face that she hated, reminding her of before this had started happening. When he was nice to her, one of the only doctors who ever listened. And then... But if he really was that old person, then why did this keep happening to her?

Still, she struggled weakly, feeling the sting of bile in her throat. Not again. She couldn't do it anymore.

He didn't hear the beep, but Maria did, and she went still. In the alcove, she couldn't see if the door had really opened. But there were no shouts, no one pulling him off her, and her brief flare of hope faded. She had imagined it.

The fight faded from her and she stopped, staring up at the silhouette as its arm moved down. Before her eyes he turned, twisting into inhumanity, nothing more than a shadow. A monster, now. The doctor was gone.

She closed her eyes. That was easier. There wasn't a person, there never had been one, just a creature from the deepest depths of Wonderland. Soon, again, it would retreat.

"Get. Off her. Now." The guttural voice stabbed the darkness, and the monster, suddenly the doctor again, froze. When he looked behind him, the black muzzle of a gun was in his face.

Slowly, he climbed off the bed, raising his hands in the air. Maria scrambled into the corner the moment his weight lifted off her. Wiping her tear-streaked face, she looked at her saviour, though it needed no confirmation. She'd known who it was the moment she heard his voice.

"Now, there's no need for the gun," the doctor said carefully, his eyes darting to the door beyond the guard. "Let's just take it eas - "

Rei didn't wait to hear any more, grabbing him by the shirt and shoving his face into his. "What were you doing to her?!"

The doctor hit the wall with a sharp cry of pain as Rei shoved him hard. Clutching his shoulder, he answered, "If you must know, I came to check on her and found her in the midst of a seizure. I was forced to restrain her."

Rei looked at Maria, curled up and sobbing in the corner of her bed, and his eyes widened. Her strange, reserved behaviour these past few months... It all made sense now.

"Bullshit," he hissed.

The doctor smoothed down his clothes, a dark glare lingering behind his glasses despite the diplomatic note to his voice. "Just go back to

your room, son. Let's both leave amicably, and we can all forget that this night happened."

Rei lowered his gun slowly, a look of incredulity in his eyes. "What? You just want me to forget about this?" He raised it again. Despite the darkened room, his rage was visible in the angry glint of his eyes. "That's not good enough!"

"There'll be trouble for you if you say anything about this," the man growled. "Whose word are they going to believe? A guard's? Or a respected doctor's?" He moved past Rei, ignoring the gun trailing him all the way.

Standing between him and Maria, he stopped, eyes on the far wall. "Just leave. I'll do the same."

For a moment, it seemed like Rei was going to let him. He stood still as the doctor walked towards the door, reaching out to press the button.

"If you think I'm going to do nothing..." The doctor stopped, beginning to turn back. "You're *wrong!*"

Rei wasn't thinking straight, and it happened too fast to stop himself. All it took was that first decision, and the rest came tumbling down. He pulled the trigger, the first round dropping him instantly as his glasses flew off his face.

Then came the second bullet, and the third, and Rei realized that he couldn't stop. He also didn't care. The doctor stopped twitching after the fifth round, but the guard kept shooting and shooting until the chamber emptied with a click.

Click. Click. Click. Then, Rei stopped, slowly lowering the weapon.

He and Maria sat there for several stunned seconds. The little room was so quiet it seemed to be swallowing them.

Then Rei threw the gun and dropped to his knees, sobbing as red pooled around him and soaked into his pants. Maria remained immobile, too terrified to run to him. Tiny drops of blood were spattered on her face, but she couldn't lift her hands to wipe them away. Her thoughts had frozen to a standstill.

She didn't know this would happen. As much as the thought of the monster made her skin crawl, this hadn't been what she wanted. She'd just wanted it to stop, not like this.

But as terrified as she was, a part of her was relieved. He couldn't hurt her anymore.

The girl stayed petrified within her wall of blankets, but Rei came to her, pulling her limp form into an embrace. "How?" he cried, hugging her tighter. "How did I let this happen to you?"

Maria said nothing. She gripped his shirt tightly as she silently cried into his shoulder. It wasn't meant to be like that... Now what would happen to Rei? She should have said something when she'd had the chance, and maybe this wouldn't have gone so far.

Fear had always paralyzed her, kept her silent. And now her best friend would pay for it.

She just wanted to go back. Maybe if she closed her eyes and sank into his warmth, she would open them, and the doctor would be gone, and Shadow would be there, and Rei would be smiling...

His shrill voice dragged her back into a horrifying reality. She opened her eyes, and past his shoulder, the corpse stared back at her. "It was my job to keep you safe... But this whole time..."

He relaxed his grip on her, suddenly going quiet. It was too late for that. That man had already hurt her, and there was nothing that could reverse it. But he had saved her from it. He'd happily accept whatever consequences awaited him.

"It's over, Maria," he whispered, his bloody hand marring her hair.
"It's all over."

For a moment, leaning into his embrace, she believed it. But, young as she was, Maria knew that this was only the beginning.

Footsteps thundered down the hall, and Rei pulled away, standing to meet his fate. Five guards stood in the hall, and they were met with horror when the door opened and the lights snapped on. A nightmarish corpse with an unrecognizable face, a small, bloody girl, and a man with hell in his eyes.

Rei might have been their colleague, but there was no excuse for him in this situation. The guards were on him immediately, roughly shoving him into the wall and handcuffing him. Maria went ignored as they tugged Rei up, pushing him towards the doorway.

He met her eyes one last time before he was pulled away, and the door slid shut behind him.

"Talk, killer! If you fear for your life you'll talk!"

Rei coughed up a bloody glob of spit. He would have rubbed his swollen jaw, but his handcuffs were locked behind the chair he sat on. "Already told you what happened," he said hoarsely.

He lifted his head, eyeing the guard who had thrown the blow. Didn't know him well, but they'd never quite gotten on. Guess when it came time to play good cop, bad cop, he didn't balk at the chance to punch him in the face.

Another guard stepped forward, arms crossed. He was matter-of-fact in tone. "We know what you *did*. You stepped into the room, fired fifteen rounds into the doctor's head, and had some form of contact with Ms. Robotnik before you were arrested.

"What we don't know is why you committed the murder. That man was the most respected doctor on the ship. He was known as a quiet, charming person, and nobody noted any ill will between you two. The child refuses to speak, so we must turn to the only other witness."

"In other words," the first guard snarled, "if you don't cough it up now, you won't be able to confess at all!"

Rei sat back, tensing in preparation for another blow. "I refuse to speak to anyone but Professor Robotnik about my motives."

The punch collided all but instantly, and with enough force to send his vision reeling. The chair would have fallen over had it not been placed against the wall. Rei groaned in pain, tipping his head back and staring at the ceiling.

"You can't kill me," he rasped, grinning weakly. "And you'll never get a word out of Maria!"

Before the next blow could come, the door slid open and all but Rei turned to face the one who'd entered the room. An even voice reached their ears. "Please, men, there's no need for violence."

"You say that, after what he did to the doctor?!" the first guard yelled. Maybe he *wasn't* just acting.

Rei looked up, his vision going hazy after the abuse he'd sustained, and the blurred face of Gerald Robotnik greeted him.

"Give me the key," Gerald said severely.

"Professor - !"

"And please excuse yourselves after. I believe Mr. Furukawa wished to speak with me in private."

Grumbling, the guards did as he asked and quickly saw themselves out. Rei, now uncuffed, watched the Professor warily as he casually

sat at the table in the middle of the interrogation room.

"Have a seat, Rei."

The ex-guard did as he asked, staring down at the table. He could feel Gerald's eyes on him, but his own remained rooted to the pale wood. There was a short pause.

"Sajipean descent?" the Professor queried. Seemed the strange feeling lingering in that cramped room wasn't affecting him.

"My family has lived in the United Federation since its birth, but yes," Rei answered hesitantly. "According to my mom, anyway. She could have made it up for all I know."

His tone dropped as he turned. "She was kinda obsessed with it, though she's never even left the UF. Had to give me the name and everything. As if my eccentric mother wearing a kimono every single day and packing my lunch with rice and sushi wasn't bad enough. Everyone in school beat me up for it."

Rei stopped himself there. So they shared some distant, *distant* heritage. The Professor didn't need to hear his life story.

Gerald, however, didn't seem bothered. He chuckled. "My parents were the complete opposite. I was only second generation, but they did everything they could to help me fit in. Even giving me a Federation name."

The younger man glanced up. "Didn't help?"

"No." For the first time, Gerald's expression turned downcast. "And this was before the war."

It occurred to Rei that they were sitting in a freezing cold interrogation room casually discussing their childhoods. "You didn't come here to talk about our lineage, old-timer."

"That I didn't." The Professor's tone became all-business. "Maria is too traumatized to speak about the... event, so I need your account."

Rei crossed his arms, defiant. "Why trust me?"

Gerald looked down. "Maria was always going on about you. 'Rei this, Rei that'..." He smiled bitterly. "She has faith in you, so even if you had no good intentions, I still must trust her judgment. Plus," he added, "she was left unharmed when you very easily could have killed her as well."

Rei narrowed his eyes. "I would never hurt Maria. I swore I would keep her safe."

Reaching up, the Professor removed his dark glasses. His eyes shared Maria's icy blue irises, but were sharp and narrow compared to her wide-eyed stare. "Safe from what?"

The same thing Maria had so often asked, now posed to Rei by Maria's intimidating grandfather. "Not everyone on this ship has good intentions."

Gerald put his glasses on again and leaned back. "The president himself, as the head of this operation, has helped me select the personnel to work on the ARK. I trust them."

Rei slammed his hands on the table, startling him. "You have *no* idea what that pervert did to your granddaughter!"

Gerald's eyes widened and he gaped at Rei. Not much surprised the weathered man anymore, but this... He met the thought of anyone daring to harm sweet, pure-hearted Maria with equal parts disbelief and disgust.

He quickly composed himself, leaning on the table and exhaling deeply. "I want to believe that you're using my emotions to your advantage." He rubbed his temple, trying to process this. "You have to understand, Rei, that you're in a very bad position. Maria began

acting... strange shortly after she met you. That could simply be a coincidence, or it could not. The situation could well be reversed."

Rei glowered at him. Even the implication of that left him seething. "That monster would never have gotten justice on this ship. I took matters into my own hands. If you can't believe that, then there is nothing left to say."

"The fact is," said Gerald, "unless I can get Maria to speak about what happened that night, there is no evidence to support or refute your claim."

Gerald pushed the chair back and stood, straightening his coat. "Your transport back to Earth for trial is being arranged, where you'll likely be imprisoned until Maria has recovered enough to give a testimony." He stared hard the table. "Or the secret has died with her."

He nodded curtly, turning to leave the speechless Rei there. The ex-guard thought he would go without another word, but at the last moment, he paused and stood silently in the doorway.

The Professor turned, a shadow of grief covering his face. "What have I done, Rei? Have I only prolonged her suffering?"

Rei stared at him in surprise, but his expression softened. "Everybody deserves to live," the man said gently. "Even if they have no chance to survive, they should at least have the chance to try."

Gerald eyes fell to the cold white floor. "I would like to believe that, by bringing Maria here as an infant, she would be safe from the horrors that Earth has to offer. Protected... from the monstrous people who inhabit this world." He turned away, melting into the shadows. "Perhaps I was wrong."

The door locked with a click, and Rei was left there to wonder if, perhaps, *he* was wrong. Maybe it would have been better if Maria

had slipped away before she could ever come to this wretched place.

It was five days before Maria felt safe enough to leave her room. Five days of turning away from Grandfather in silence, the words stuck under her tongue. Of staring at the door, wondering where Rei was, if he was okay.

And even now she found herself spiralling into panic at every turn. There were twice the amount of guards patrolling this floor, and while getting past them was simple for small, sneaky Maria, she was expecting them to whip around and leave her a bloody mess on the floor at any moment.

Didn't you want him to save you? her mind reprimanded. Rei had been protecting her. And he'd certainly done the job he'd promised.

Still, she couldn't erase the sight of the monster's mangled body from her mind. The faceless, bloody corpse was burned into her memory.

She didn't hate Rei. How could she? But when she thought of that deranged glint in his eyes, of the blood spreading over the floor and staining his skin, she was terrified of what her dear friend was capable of.

At least, now, it was all over. But though the monster was slain, it still chased her behind her eyelids.

Shadow knew something was wrong the moment Maria entered the room. He'd felt uneasy the past few nights with no word from her, and the sight of the limp, dead-eyed girl before him confirmed his concerns.

"Maria?" Shadow pressed against the glass, but she only shuffled by him.

The door to the testing chamber swung open moments later. The hedgehog stared at her quizzically, worried but not sure what to do. "Are you... alright?"

Maria shook her head mutely. "Rei is gone." Uttering those words, she had to lean against the wall in Shadow's room for support; it was as if the breath had been sucked out of her.

"Gone?" Shadow echoed.

The girl dropped to the ground, tears overwhelming her, though they didn't break. She had cried too much already. Maria pulled her knees to her chest, face emotionless. "It doesn't matter now."

Shadow sat next to her hesitantly, concern etched into his face. For all of Maria's hugs, her tender smiles and the warmth of her hands, he still had no clue how to comfort her. "What happened?"

"He killed someone to save me."

Shadow stiffened. "Who was it? Did he hurt you?" he barked.

The young girl cringed at his sharp words, the tone reminding her of Rei's savage speech. "I... think so." It seemed somehow more than just hurt that he had afflicted her with; it was something... worse. Something wrong.

"So I've failed to keep you safe." Shadow wilted. "Like I promised I would."

Maria shook her head quickly, trying to reassure her friend. "No, no! It was my fault for not telling anyone. It's been happening for so long, but I never..." Her voice caught, and she looked miserably down again. Why had she been so stupid?

Shadow tilted his head, unable to understand her motivations. "If he's been hurting you for a long time... why *didn't* you tell us?"

The girl pulled her legs closer. "Whenever I tried to tell anyone what happened, it felt like I couldn't breathe. Because of that, nobody knows why Rei killed that person, so they're going to - " She choked, remembering the whispers of the scientists. " - to execute him."

"Then it's not your fault," Shadow said firmly. "You can't blame yourself for that."

Maria buried her face in her knees, deaf to his reassuring words. "I just don't know what to do, Shadow."

Shadow paused, staring at the ground as well. "You *have* to tell the Professor the truth," he finally advised. "I don't think you should blame yourself for being scared. But it's just like Rei said, if someone dies because of your inaction, then it's nearly the same as killing them yourself."

The stark words hit her like a brick. Her friend was right. Nobody else knew what happened that night, so if she just sat in her room and waited for whatever came... If she didn't speak up... Rei was going to die.

Maria sat up and wiped her damp eyes. "You're right. I'll talk to Grandfather tomorrow."

"Good luck. Just get him back here safe."

Maria tilted her head. "I thought you didn't like Rei."

Shadow gave her a sidelong glance. "You care about him, so if anything happened to him, it'd hurt you." He leaned against the wall. "Plus, even if he's a headache, I've gotten used to him. That's all."

Maria smiled for the first time in what felt like centuries. "You like him."

"Hardly." Shadow crossed his arms.

"Hardly is a little," she teased.

"Whatever."

Maria laughed at his sulking, cheering up already. Just one more night and Rei would be free, and everything would be fixed again.

Maybe not everything. Even though talking to Shadow usually calmed her down and sorted her mind out, she still couldn't fully relax. Couldn't blot out the images of the monster, leering down at her, and suddenly very, very dead.

But maybe someday she could sleep easy without those memories haunting her. That would be a start.

One day, they would go back to the way it was before. But this time, there would be no monster. She could move on. She could be happy.

But she was wrong. Wounds that are ripped open over and over again can never heal. They get infected, eating away at your body, devouring you. Never stopping until there's nothing left.

This was Maria and Shadow's last glimpse of happiness. Just a glimmer, quickly snuffed out.

Gerald rooted through the hundreds of boxes containing the ship's surveillance tapes. Red, the pilot, was in charge of them. Red was also messy and terrible at sorting, which never failed to get on Gerald's back.

He finally found the box containing the tapes he needed and popped one into the television, fast forwarding through the long hours. Maria's room and the hallway outside it didn't have a camera, but maybe he could check the other parts of the ship and get to the bottom of this.

He stared, bored, at the tapes, until a strange flash of black and red caught his eye. Gerald scrambled for the pause button and gaped at

what he saw. He realized then that he'd accidentally chosen tapes from a week earlier, but he was glad he'd made that mistake.

Frozen on the screen were the blurry faces of Maria, Rei, and the *experiment* .

Rage filled him then. Not only had his granddaughter disobeyed him, putting herself in grave danger, but the murderer had knowingly assisted her! Not one, but two extremely dangerous people interacting with Maria!

He didn't want to believe what he was seeing. But for hours Gerald went through more tapes, and in every month, every set, every box, there the three of them were. This had been going on for months; no wonder she had been so exhausted lately. Maria could have died at any moment thanks to his negligence.

Well, it was time to put a stop to it.

Gerald had no idea how Maria was accessing Shadow's cell, but he figured that she had learned of her ship-wide clearance, and perhaps even snatched a keycard. He *could* simply demand it back. Put a guard outside her room at night. Whatever precautions he had to take.

But he knew his granddaughter - she would always find a way. If she wanted to visit Shadow... He could remove her clearance, hide the keycards, post more guards on this level. But she would still find a way to get to him. That was just how Maria was.

Then there was only one solution. He had to prove to her that Shadow was a dangerous, mindless experiment, so she would stay away herself.

Gerald knew this would hurt her, and he wished it didn't have to be this way. But even if Shadow hadn't killed her *yet*, there was no telling what he could do. One malfunction, one glitch in his brain, and Maria would be gone. Forever.

He would rather leave Maria scarred than dead.

And Rei? After this, he couldn't trust a thing that man said. There was no telling what he had really done to Maria that night, if the doctor had even been guilty. He would probably never know the truth. But that was good for Gerald. He wouldn't have to feel any regret for this.

"Maria. Get up."

Opening her eyes, Maria saw a shadow looming over her. She scrambled back, just catching the scream as it nearly escaped her throat. As her eyes adjusted she saw that it was only her grandfather. But with the way he was staring at her, this revelation did not afford any relief.

"G-Grandfather?" The hard look on his face was scaring her, even more so after he pulled her roughly out of bed. His grip on her hand was too tight to break away from.

"You're coming with me. There's something you need to see."

Maria was terrified as she was practically dragged down the hall. He was being unusually harsh with her, his words short and terse. This was nothing like her usual kind, gentle grandfather. What had gotten into him? "Where are we going?"

"I know about you and Shadow." Maria's heart skipped a beat, but she didn't have time to stop. "So you're going to find out what that creature can do if he ever turned on you. I told you, he's not a person. He's nothing."

Maria pulled against the hand holding her, but too weak, she was forced to stumble forward. "Shadow would never hurt anyone!"

Her cries fell on deaf ears. Soon, the two arrived to Shadow's holding cell, just in time to see a guard slam the door shut behind

Rei. He stumbled into Shadow's room, landing on his knees before the confused hedgehog.

"Rei!" Maria ran to the glass and pressed against it. The guard exchanged glances with Gerald and left the room.

"Maria? What's going on?" With the Professor here too, and that murderous look in his eyes... Realization dawned on his face. It was over. But what exactly that meant, he didn't yet realize.

Rei, though still groggy from being forced out of bed and dragged to Shadow's cell, did understand. He ran to Maria and slammed on the glass separating them. "You soulless bastard! If you're going to kill me, why would you bring Maria here?!"

The Professor's words were flat. "She has to learn."

"Shadow isn't dangerous! You might refuse to believe that he cares about Maria, but he swore he would keep her safe! Does that mean nothing to you?!"

"Shadow," Gerald said clearly into the microphone, "kill Rei."

The hedgehog's eyes widened and he went stiff, his expression deadening. He was hard-coded to follow any order the Professor gave him, even if it had to overwrite his emotions and memories. There was no fighting that.

"Shadow! No!" Maria screamed, banging on the glass.

Shadow couldn't hear her, except for the faint pounding of her fists. He stared at her with lifeless eyes, all of his soul struggling against the Professor's orders. If he followed them... wouldn't that mean he'd hurt Maria? Wouldn't that break his promise?

"Shadow," Gerald said more firmly, "kill him. Now."

The hedgehog fought as his memories drained away, replaced with that directive: Kill Rei. That was the only thing in the world. Those

nights with his friends were gone, the compassion she had taught him erased.

As simple as two words, and nothing up to it mattered. Just that order; nothing else. No Rei. No ARK. No emotions. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Remember... Don't forget her...

No Maria.

Maria...

Kill Rei.

I'm sorry.

The black hedgehog's gaze hardened, only detached contempt left in them. Maria could immediately sense the difference in his demeanour. He'd once been serious but kind, as gentle as one with his strength and powers could be, and that sweet creature had been replaced with...

With a monster.

Maria pounded on the glass until her hands bled. "No!" she cried shrilly, attracting Gerald's attention to her. He dragged her away, smearing the glass red as she struggled to reach her friend.

Rei backed away, but seeing the apathy in Shadow's eyes, he knew that he had no chance of survival. So instead of forcing Maria to watch him struggle and die, he turned to his young friend, pressing his hand against the glass. "Thank you, Maria," he said, so softly that his voice was barely picked up. "Thank you for being my only friend."

Maria stilled at that, staring at him in shock. Gerald didn't react, his hold tight on Maria. No matter what Rei said, the Professor could not take back his actions. It was too late to change them. At least, that's what he told himself so he wouldn't have to regret it.

Rei cried out as Shadow approached from behind, a well-placed kick bringing him to his knees. The ex-guard slid back as far as he could, not bothering to defend himself. He could see the raw power coursing through this hedgehog. He'd only prolong Maria's pain.

Shadow was trained in efficiency and brevity, so he didn't spend any time knocking the man around. Honing in on the chaos energy distributed about the universe, he began to collect it into himself. The power ran through his veins, and he formed it into a ball brimming with power - the same one that Maria believed he could never have hurt anyone with.

Rei sat back, watching the formation of the sphere of crackling red energy, the way it seemed to feed off light and even his own life force.

It's beautiful, he thought.

And then it collided with him. The orb knocked him violently onto his back and immediately began sucking the life out of him, sapping every bit of energy away. Within moments, the spears of pain turned to cold, and then numb.

His fingers twitched. He couldn't move.

Rei's head fell to the side, gaze landing on Maria. Beyond the sheet of glass, he could almost hear her cries as tears ran down her face. It was illogical, but he wished she wouldn't look like that. Her smile or laugh, that was what he had lived for. Making her happy... It was the only thing that made him feel anymore. The only one that had ever made him feel whole, and real, and alive.

He wished he could see her smile... Just one more time...

Maria screamed, the Professor having to hold her back with both hands, as Rei's eyes glazed over and his body went limp. Gerald grunted, shocked by the force inside her. How could this small, weak girl have such strength?

Soon she stopped her struggling and dropped to her knees, sobbing. But, mercifully, the darkness claimed her and she slumped to the ground. Gerald's shouts were muted and far away.

I don't want to live in a world without Rei. Her eyes closed, the coldness of the floor seeping into her. Shadow's face, twisted with hatred, with empty, filled her memories.

That wasn't him. That couldn't be the one who had promised with such intensity to protect her. *A world without Shadow.*

Without them, she was all alone.

Please, she thought as she faded away. Please, let it be a dream...

In the end, Gerald's plan was a success. Maria was left broken and terrified. She never visited Shadow again.

The Professor traced the picture of her that sat on his office desk and sighed. And at what cost? He knew his methods were... extreme. But that girl was too trusting for her own good. She would never stop seeing Shadow unless she realized what he was really like!

But she wouldn't talk to anyone now, or even leave her room. She spent her days there, curled up, facing away from the door. Wouldn't respond to anything he said, and even if he made her get up, that haunting, empty stare was pasted permanently on her face.

And she didn't sleep. He'd check on her at the dead of night, only to find her unresponsive but with eyes wide open.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way," he'd told her, stroking her cheek as he tried to get her to eat.

Maria had wanted to flinch, remembering the doctor, but she didn't. Her skin was cold and grey under his thumb. "I know you can't

believe that right now. And... I know you must hate me. I don't expect you to forgive me, Maria." Gerald had paused, examining her vacant expression, the eyes that didn't stare back. "But please... even if you can never forgive me, please try to understand."

He'd killed her, Gerald realized. That sweet, innocent girl... she might never come back.

Gerald's calling device beeped from his desk. "Professor? Can you clear us to come up?"

"Yes, yes," Gerald muttered irately, pressing a button to unlock the elevator. "It's open."

Moments later, two men clad in doctor's uniform appeared before him. "Mr. Furukawa's family has been notified of his death. We informed them and the officials that he escaped his holding cell, but in an attempt to leave, entered the Biolizard's containment and was killed."

"Very good," the distracted Gerald answered, turning away to open a wide drawer on his desk. "You can leave now."

"There was... one other thing," the second man said hesitantly.

Gerald sighed and shut the drawer. "What is it?"

"The doctor who died unfortunately; we performed an autopsy on him, Federation regulations and all, you know, and... well..."

"Stop stuttering, already!" Gerald snapped. "What about him?"

"The doctor," the first man said coolly, "was in the final stages of NIDS."

Gerald's eyes widened. NIDS... The illness that wasn't transmitted through normal means, being coughed on or shaking hands. Only directly, through blood and body fluids, between mother and child, could such a disease be passed on.

Everyone who came to this ship was tested; sickness in the controlled ventilation would be disastrous. If that man had been ill with anything when he came here, he would have known. He would have *known*.

Maria was the *only* person with NIDS on the ARK.

Without treatment, the disease ran its course within a few years - and that went right back to when Maria had begun acting strangely. If the doctor was dying of NIDS...

Rei was innocent; he had been telling the truth the whole time. But Gerald hadn't believed him. When he made his decision, he wasn't even *thinking* of that, only of the guard's involvement with Shadow. But Rei had thrown away his life to free Maria from suffering, while he had done nothing.

No, worse than nothing.

Gerald had murdered him. Maria's only friend. And there was nothing he could do to take it back.

Gone

I'm sorry, Maria... It was like I'd forgotten all about you. The only thing I could think of was following the Professor's orders, and I... I couldn't stop.

Everyone deserves a chance. That's what you always said. Rei... He was just like me, trying to keep you safe, to give you that chance. I might not have liked him, but he didn't deserve to die like that!

I failed... I promised that I would never hurt you, and I failed.

Now you're gone.

I wish you would come. Just once... Just so I can tell you I'm sorry. Even if you can't accept that; even if you don't believe me. But it's been so long... Months, years... I don't know anymore. I don't think you're ever coming back.

I need to forget. I'd rather live in a world without her than remember that broken expression, shattering the world of my only friend.

We never should have met. At least then we wouldn't have to suffer in this horrible silence.

We never should have...

...

She was right. Wishes do come true. I can feel the memories seeping out every day, finally offering some peace. I can only hope that she's beginning to forget too. Maybe someday we'll just stop thinking of each other.

Nothing feels real anymore. I just wake up and go to sleep again, every day, my mind as blank and empty as the dead of space. Only

sometimes do my thoughts return to me, and then it's all quiet again. But it's better this way.

Something happened a year ago, though I can't remember what. A girl's grief-stricken face is still burned in my mind.... Maria. That's her name. I'd forgotten. Why isn't she here anymore?

Every day is the same. The Professor says I'm two years old. Strange, a toddler with the mind and body of a teenager. There was a girl once, long ago. I asked the Professor about her and he turned away. All I can remember of her is the flash of gold hair, a piercing smile. I wonder where she came from. I wonder where she went.

Five years old. The Professor celebrated by letting me into his library, just for the afternoon. Does he finally trust me, after all this time? Will I ever leave this room again?

It's strange. Sometimes I think I wasn't always by myself. Sometimes... it feels like there might have been someone else. But even if I'm right, maybe it's better that I forgot them anyway. I'll always be alone. That person, whoever they were... They were here for a moment. And now they're gone.

Life carries on.

Maria never fully healed. But, eventually, she started talking to her grandfather again. Began to forgive him, if only a little. She knew that though his methods were cruel and extreme, to say the least, Gerald had only wanted to keep her safe - a twisted act of love. Maria didn't have to like it. She just had to understand.

And she did understand, though sometimes, the old sting of pain and anger would rush up into her chest when she remembered Rei. Grandfather hadn't struck the final blow, but he had ordered her dearest friend's execution just to prove a point. That was not so easy to forget.

But, despite the both of them avoiding that topic, Gerald had apologized, begged her forgiveness for what he had done. It wasn't enough - it would never be enough - but it was something. So she had to try to forgive him. If only so she could begin to let it go.

Shadow, she never forgave.

And she hated herself for it. She wanted to, she truly did, or at least she had at some point that was lost to her now. But whenever she tried to recall the happy nights they had spent together, the images were quickly wiped out by the memory of that terrible day. Shadow, the soulless monster, standing over Rei's battered corpse.

Rei... Rei, her only friend in the world. The one who had made her smile, given her hope, lifted her up on his shoulders and let her reach for the stars. He was gone, and she had herself to blame. Herself, and Shadow.

Maria couldn't have known of his regret. She didn't realize that Gerald had forced him to do it, coded him to never refuse an order. All she knew was that her friend had betrayed her, and that perhaps Grandfather had been right. If he ever returned... he would kill her too.

She'd had enough of death. So many people had gone because of her... Her parents, the doctor, now Rei... It was too much. No one else could die, and she wasn't going to be next.

So she tried to forget Shadow. Forget Rei. Pretend they never existed; it was just her, it had always been only Maria. But her nights were filled with horror, plagued by endless nightmares that trapped her in the past. Her once-simple dreams were replaced with monsters choking her, corpses without faces, Shadow hunting her down to finish the job.

Even in the day, whenever she closed her eyes she saw Rei's lifeless body, his hand stretched out for her. The blood-spattered

face, crooked with that old smile, until the light in his animated eyes all of a sudden went dark. It never ceased. It always lingered.

But she found brief solace in helping take care of little Abraham, a hint of respite in her books, and a moment of peace in imaginings of Earth that were just as strong as ever.

And to her credit, even though every day was just a long dread, a waiting for something to set her off and the terror to creep back in... She tried to be happy. After all the horrible things that had happened to her, she was still optimistic, sweet Maria. Not even this could take that away.

As for Shadow, in his grief, his memory began to slowly fade away. The snatches of remembrances were accredited to mere fantasy, and he convinced himself that there had never been anyone else.

There was little to say of his simple life. He woke up to his white cell. He followed the Professor's training orders. He read the books that were brought to him. And he went to sleep again.

There was no happiness in his small world, but there was no pain, either. Nothing ever changed, and he liked it that way.

This was how five years passed.

Gerald sat at the desk in his dimly lit laboratory, sighing as he wrote up the latest report on Experiment 56. "I'm a professor, not a bloody secretary," he grumbled at the darkened monitor that hung before him, stretching his aching wrist.

The experiment is doing well, as usual, he scribbled, unable to keep a hint of sarcasm out the report. This month he's been tested on weapon proficiency. Small to medium gun handling is excellent. Large gun handling needs work; he has no problem picking them up but struggles to aim. Recommend that he uses anything from a pistol to an assault rifle on the field.

The president had allowed Shadow to be a test subject in finding a universal cure for disease, or even to unwinding his hypothesized immortality for human uses, but he was first and foremost commissioned as an army weapon.

Subject is extremely proficient at harnessing chaos energy. Further tests are not recommended with a Chaos Emerald, as his power may become too much to control with even one.

Gerald had had one, once, but he disposed of it quickly to keep it out of certain hands. That was one promise he had no intention of keeping, if even he lived long enough to see the contract out. It didn't matter if it cost him his life.

Subject's strength remains at stable levels. Under heavy stress he can lift extreme amounts of weight; otherwise he generally can lift anywhere from 1000 to 3000 pounds (454-1361 kg) with little exertion. Even without exercise, his strength never deteriorates past

-

Gerald groaned as the large screen before him began beeping, signalling a message from off the ARK. Composing himself, he accepted the call, quickly straightening as the G.U.N. commander appeared before him.

Gerald nodded respectfully. "What can I do for you, Commander?" His eyes narrowed behind dark glasses, noting that the man was standing on a spaceship. Odd.

"Professor Robotnik," the grey-haired man addressed, his voice strict and formal, "we've received... disturbing reports involving the the failed experiment, as well as the current so-called 'ultimate lifeform'."

"Ah, I see G.U.N. is chasing rumours again," the Professor brushed off, though his heart began to pound. An accusation from the commander of G.U.N. was not to be taken lightly. "And what would those be?"

"Rumours with picture evidence," the man said, curtly smoothing his crisp uniform. "To begin, the Biolizard, despite showing extreme aggression and lack of higher intelligence, has not been put down? And has even claimed the lives of scientists and guards aboard?"

"That creature is secured and, though useless to G.U.N., still represents an important progression in life science and biotechnology." Gerald's tone was cold. "Any incidents were due to personal disregard of safety protocols."

The Commander was unfazed. "We've also heard alarming reports of the current experiment's unruly behaviour and its extreme, unmoderated powers."

Gerald glared at him. "Experiment 56 is completely under my control. Your instructions were to create a lifeform that possessed more power than humans could dream of wielding, and we have followed that directive."

"It's of no use if we cannot harness the creature. If the reports are true, Experiment 56 possesses free will." His lip curled. "It could easily escape, wreaking havoc on the world. Or worse yet," the Commander continued, looking down at the Professor with distrust, "you could use it to usurp us and attack the United Federation."

"That's ridiculous!" the Professor sputtered. "You have no basis of evidence to claim - "

The younger man raised his hand, coolly stopping him. "We are coming to annex the ship and put down the experiments. Project Shadow is over." Gerald's eyes widened. "The G.U.N. fleet will arrive in an hour. If you do not let us on board, we will not hesitate to shoot down the ARK and the people inside it."

"There are *children* - "

"Please choose your next actions wisely, Professor. Resistance will not be tolerated." With that, the screen shut off.

Gerald sat in stunned silence for several moments. This... this was it, he realized, tears springing to his eyes. With Shadow euthanized, and everyone else evacuated... Even if he managed to smuggle off Shadow's blood and tissue samples, five years had given him nothing, and those would only last so long.

Maria was going to die.

He slammed his hands on the desk. *No, no, no!* He had dedicated himself to her, given up his life to keep her alive! From the moment the police had delivered the news of his son's suicide to him... He had taken that orphaned girl as his own daughter, whispered to the dying infant that he would save her... He would save her, even if it killed him! He could *not* fail now!

What he was going to do was risky. He knew it would put his life in danger... put Maria's life in danger... But it didn't matter. They had no chance otherwise. He had not worked for this long just to watch her slip away.

His wrinkled hands stopped shaking as a deadly calm washed over him. As small of a chance as it was, Maria deserved to live. It was just like poor Rei had said: Everyone, even those whose prospects are hopeless, at least should have that.

And that meant he would have to trust Shadow.

Whether Maria died at the hands of disease, by Shadow's doing, or even by G.U.N. if they caught her escaping... What did it matter anymore? The only difference was that by getting off the ship, she had a chance. As long as Shadow was alive... she had a *chance*.

And maybe someday he or one of the other scientists could find them - someone who could make a cure, once and for all. The odds were against them, but it was all they had.

Gerald knew he had to make haste to give Shadow and Maria a head start. As he briskly walked through the halls, he used his

pocket device to announce over the intercom, "Attention all residents of the ARK, we are being visited by the Guardian Unit of Nations. Please return to your rooms immediately and remain there until further notice. Pilots, stay in the cockpit."

Finally, he arrived at Shadow's containment cell. He might have roused Maria, said goodbye, but there was no time for that. There was still much to do to ensure they could reach the escape pods unhindered, and the Commander would be expecting him in the hangar.

Shadow had his nose buried in a book, but his head snapped up as the exit door slid open and the man himself entered the observation room. Strange, as Gerald usually only came in for training twice a day.

Gerald wasted no time, immediately opening the door to his cell - and leaving it that way as he staggered inside. Shadow's eyes widened and he put down his book, noting the frazzled, distressed look on the Professor's face. Very strange.

"Professor...?" the hedgehog ventured, not wanting to upset him. With his odd behaviour, who knew how he could react.

The man quickly crossed the room and knelt by Shadow, putting a heavy hand on his shoulder. Shadow flinched, not used to being touched, and especially not by him.

"Shadow, you have to listen to me," Gerald said. He paused, unsure where to begin. How do you tell someone that they're going to be executed? "Soldiers are coming to cancel Project Shadow and put you down."

Shadow stilled, eyeing the Professor. Could he be serious? Who would want to kill him, and why?

Gerald exhaled wearily. "Without you, my granddaughter will have no hope of a cure. She'll die, and you, my greatest accomplishment,

along with her. I cannot allow that to happen." The Professor straightened. "So I'm letting you go. You are free."

Shadow gaped at him, his gaze snapping to the open door. Was this some sort of test? One look at the man's face, more serious than he'd ever seen it, dispelled that thought. This wasn't some cruel trial... He was truly free to go.

"Shadow," Gerald said, his voice taking on a commanding tone, "take my granddaughter and get to the escape pods in the hangar. Kill anyone who puts either of you in danger. Leave this ship, go to Earth, and never come back."

Shadow nodded sharply, the command clicking in his mind. He had no choice but to follow it now. "Where is she?"

"On this level of the ship. Hall C, not far from here."

Shadow walked off immediately to complete the order, but he stopped at the door. "What about you?"

Gerald's gaze was resolute, and regretful. A hollow promise already broken. "I will find you. Just keep her safe until then. Go now, Shadow." Seeing him hesitate, he said more firmly, "Go."

Shadow's bright red eyes met the Professor's pale blue ones for the last time. He'd always had mixed feelings about Gerald, but he respected him for creating him, and for his dedication to that cause. And, finally, the Professor trusted him enough to set him free. Even if it was out of necessity, it didn't matter.

He had no concept of a family, but as strange and broken as it was, Gerald was the closest thing to one he possessed. Some sort of warped father figure, detached and strict, yet looking out for him for reasons he couldn't understand.

The black hedgehog walked away, leaving Gerald there with his head bowed. It was done now. There was nothing left but to pray for

Maria's safety, and hope that Rei's dying words had been right: Shadow would keep Maria safe. He knew Shadow had lost his memory, but perhaps there was still something left in him, even just an instinct. An old promise.

That hope was all he had now.

Maria glanced up from *Through the Looking Glass* as her grandfather's voice came over the intercom. G.U.N. was visiting? They had single inspectors every year or two, scary men in suits who fussed and bickered over Shadow and the Biolizard before silently going away. But never more than them. Weird.

She knew Grandfather had always disliked the group, mostly because they barely tolerated her presence and Gerald's side project. He'd had to bargain her into the deal, that's what he said. G.U.N. was only interested in a super-soldier.

Fear crept up, but Maria tried not to worry about it. *You're twelve years old*, she chided herself. *You can't be so scared of everything*. It was probably nothing to be frightened of. Just a big inspection, that's all.

Maria relaxed, disappearing into Alice's world again. Even if being brave was hard, she knew she couldn't be so timid forever. She had to grow up someday.

Maybe even now.

Shadow headed through the empty halls, sighing to himself at what a bother a companion would be. A little girl, no less, if how the Professor had briefly described his granddaughter was right. Not that he talked about her much.

He wanted to just leave himself; he'd probably be at the escape pods in a day, and he'd only have to worry about his own safety. But

whenever he tried to turn away, the command repeated in his mind, and he was forced to continue on.

Well, there was the only door in this hall that didn't lead to a laboratory. Shadow couldn't help but roll his eyes. *Let's just grab the girl and get out of here.*

Maria peered up from her book as she heard footsteps outside her door. Hadn't Grandfather told everyone to stay in their rooms? She set the book down and hopped out of bed, smoothing down her trailing blue skirt as she went to see who could be outside.

"Grandfather?" she called tentatively as she approached the door. As she reached for it, it beeped and opened from the outside.

Maria stared blankly at the person standing before her, looking up at her with an expression that must have been as shocked as her own. *I'm dreaming*, she thought, nearly laughing at the absurdity of it. *I must be*. She blinked.... Right? How could it really be him, after all this time?

Shadow himself just stood there, completely frozen. The matter-of-fact speech he had prepared to inform Maria of the situation disappeared from his mind. His breath caught in his throat, and his mind screamed, *This is the missing one* .

Maria's eyes widened as the spell was broken. This was real. Shadow had finally come... come to kill her after all. Images of Rei, lifeless and broken, flashed before her eyes and tears welled up in them.

She took a step backwards, her arms shaking as she held them out. "S-stay away from me..." She stumbled back, tripping over herself.

Shadow blinked, the kid's odd behaviour shaking off the illusion. He had expected confusion, fear maybe; he knew what he was. But not the utter horror in this girl's eyes.

Still lost for words, the hedgehog stepped towards Maria. She fell with a cry, landing hard on her back. Frantically, she scrambled towards the corner and hunched over there, covering her face.

This is the end, she thought, tears leaking through her palms. After all this time... Just as she had begun to move on... The monster had come back, bringing hordes of nightmare creatures with him.

"Don't hurt me..." Maria whimpered as Shadow, unfazed by her erratic behaviour, continued walking towards her.

"Why would I?" The hedgehog crossed his arms, wondering aloud, "Is this the kid I'm supposed to be babysitting?"

When Maria didn't cease her cowering and sobbing, Shadow rolled his eyes and softened his tone, crouching next to her. "Look, kid. The Professor said that you're supposed to come with me."

The girl peered at him through her hands. "G-Grandfather?"

"Yeah."

"That's a lie! He'd never trust you with me!" Maria hid herself again in a tangle of arms and fabric. Could he just be trying to lure her away where no one would ever find her body?

Seeing he was making no progress, Shadow sighed and straightened. "Whatever." Gerald might have ordered him to save Maria, but could he honestly expect him to wait around here in the open, when G.U.N. was going to arrive at any moment and execute him?

"I'm going," Shadow said to the crying girl. "Follow me or don't. I don't care." He walked off, the door sliding shut behind him.

Maria sat there for several seconds before letting her arms drop, staring in disbelief at the closed door. He hadn't even touched her...

All this time, she'd believed Shadow would take her life the next chance he got. But he'd acted like he didn't know her at all.

What if he wasn't lying? What if Grandfather really wanted her to go with him? It was illogical, after the lengths he'd gone to keep her away from Shadow... But why else would he simply walk off without a care in the world?

She had everything to lose. If she just sat back down and resumed her book, it'd all be fine.

It was another part of her, buried deep inside, that convinced her to stand. The part that missed Shadow, missed all those carefree nights spent talking or just quietly watching the stars. The side she smothered, because it wanted to forgive Shadow and give him another chance.

Maria, as she pocketed her bottle of NIDS pills (just in case), knew she was insane to willingly chase down the person who had murdered her friend. She was terrified, of course she was.

But she had to know... Why Shadow was acting this way. Why he had killed Rei. Why he didn't want to kill her too. Any one of her questions; she had hundreds of them, and in Grandfather's silence, they'd all gone unanswered.

Luckily, the Faunas was still in sight as she crept into the hallway. Maria had barely grown the past five years, so her tiny feet were still silent on the metal floors. She approached him timidly, clutching her hands to her chest and walking slowly a few feet behind him.

"Why are you walking back there?" Shadow asked without so much as looking back.

Maria nearly jumped out of her skin, skidding to a stop. Shadow turned and put a hand on his hip. "And why are you so afraid of me, anyway?"

The girl didn't answer, only stared at him. How could he ask a question like that?

The hedgehog surveyed her with critical ruby eyes. This child was going to be a real problem if she kept that timid behaviour up. "What's your name, kid?"

Maria's eyes widened. *Like he doesn't remember you...* "M-my name?"

Shadow smirked at her reaction. "You do have one, don't you?"

"Maria." She nearly whispered it. It made sense now. He didn't want to kill her because, for some reason, he couldn't remember her... Couldn't remember what he'd done to her.

Why...?

Shadow turned away, continuing on. "I'm Shadow the Hedgehog. But you probably know that already." He looked back at her still lagging behind him, one ear pricked. "Will you just walk beside me, Maria? I'm supposed to keep an eye on you. Professor's orders."

Hesitantly, the girl followed his command, her gaze resolutely fixed on the ground as they walked together. Even though she knew she was safe if Shadow had no memories, she couldn't help but be frightened of his presence. She was too terrified to ask where they were going, or why.

Maria snatched a glance at him. He looked the same as he always had, before he'd turned, and yet the person behind those eyes felt wrong. "You're different," she said quietly. Not the monster anymore. But not her old friend either. Just... different.

"Huh?" Shadow blinked. "Have we met?"

That only confirmed her suspicion. "A long time ago."

Shadow looked her over. If that was true, why had he forgotten her after only five years? It wasn't her appearance worth remembering, for sure. Besides her short stature and frail figure, she wasn't very memorable. Cute, as most children are, but hardly a model child. Plain, really, and easily forgettable.

But there was something else about her. Timid and terrified as she was acting, it didn't seem likely, but Shadow sensed that there was more under the surface, depth. Something not soon lost to memory. She was familiar - he just couldn't say why.

"I guess I forgot," he finally said, thinking of the snatches of memories he had passed off as dreams.

Maria looked away. "I wish I could too."

"What do you *mean* the experiment escaped?!"

"Shall I word it differently?" Gerald asked dryly, unintimidated by the Commander's rage-filled face a few inches from his own.

The slightly younger man stepped back, pinching his temple. The veins popping out of his skull retreated, and when he looked up, he was fully composed. "This is unacceptable. Obviously you were not following the safety protocols - "

"Sha - " Gerald caught himself. Calling Shadow by his name would raise red flags to where his loyalty remained. "The experiment's cell is outfitted with five-inch bulletproof glass and a steel door that only I can open, as is standard. But you were correct. Experiment 56 is too powerful."

The Commander, a smug look on his face, began to speak. Gerald stopped him. "However, he remained voluntarily with us, and indeed would have served G.U.N. with no complaint, had he not heard that his death was imminent."

"Who told him?" the Commander hissed.

Gerald pondered for a moment, holding back his smirk. "A scientist or guard, perhaps. The locking system is offline for repairs..." *M aria has clearance, but just in case.* "While his cell door remained locked, the observation room was open. They may have overheard your transmission and taken advantage of the situation."

The Commander growled in frustration and spun around to the soldiers behind him. "Send out search teams to sweep the entire ship, and shoot anyone out of their rooms!"

Hesitantly Gerald lifted his arms. "Now, there's no need for violence..."

"Shut up, old man!" the Commander roared. "Interrogate every single person; use any methods you can to get it out of them! There is a traitor on board." At this he looked distrustfully at Gerald. " *Someone* on this ship knows where the experiment is. And you, you're staying in my sight. Let's go."

"Am I prisoner now?" Gerald asked with disinterest. "You may be the commander of G.U.N., but you have no power - "

The man whipped out his rifle and pressed it into Gerald's chest. "Do not be so quick to disregard my authority, Professor." He pointed his gun up and Gerald rose, his hands in the air. "Your days as head of the ARK are over. I am god now."

Gerald, pushed along with a gun in his back, wondered what the fate of the ARK could be with such a ruthless man overseeing it. This was a man who had a callous disregard for the lives of others. Not even Maria would be safe from him.

The Professor was forced down into a chair in the main control room as the Commander observed the cameras and radioed in whenever he saw anyone wandering the halls. The only thing Gerald could do was hope they made it to safety before the soldiers came for them.

A long time passed. Gerald's fingers twitched in inaction. He longed to continue sabotaging the ARK to guarantee Maria and Shadow's safe passage, but with the Commander only a few feet away, he couldn't even use his pocket device to remotely breach the ship.

He anxiously scanned the monitors for any sign of the duo, but for now, they seemed to be staying out of the cameras' way.

Something else came up on a screen, though: Red, in the cockpit. Two men barged into the room, waving their guns, and Red quickly stood. The silence on Gerald's end of the confrontation was eerie. Red began to raise his hands in the air as a sign of peace, but he was gunned down immediately.

"No!" Gerald cried, bolting up from his chair, as the pilot's limp body slumped to the ground. He looked the Commander in shock, only to see a leering smirk on his face. "What the hell was that all about?!"

"He was out of his room," the man said dismissively.

"He was the *pilot*."

"The ARK doesn't need one anymore. Anyone not killed for..." the Commander smiled knowingly, "... disregarding orders, will be deported to a containment prison and put on trial."

Gerald gaped at him. "What have we done?"

"Conspired to overthrow the Federation with dangerous experiments. Or so the story will be." A chuckle crept out his throat. "It doesn't matter. Anyone involved in Project Shadow must be disposed of, or locked away forever. News of this incident can't be getting out. You know how it is, don't you, Professor?"

Gerald slumped down into his chair, laying his head in his hands. Everyone... executed... His eyes widened. As head of the operation, of course that included him. So... even if Shadow and Maria managed to escape...

He would never see Maria again.

Maria... Sweet, innocent Maria, who he loved more than anything in this world... She was lost to him. And when he and Shadow's creators were executed, all hopes of her survival would disappear.

But there was some solace in this revelation. His granddaughter would finally get her wish. She would get to see Earth... Fade away wrapped in sunlight, going to sleep forever on a bed of soft grass, her last breath of clear air tinged with the scent of flowers. She wouldn't have to die here in the ugly, lifeless ARK, breathing recycled air, feeling nothing but the cold of metal walls.

Maria was gone. She was never coming back. But, at least, she could have a moment of happiness. His granddaughter deserved that much, after everything he had taken away from her.

Maybe

You've changed... haven't you, Shadow?

I want to believe it, I do; I want to believe that you're different now. You'd never hurt me... Just like you promised, right?

But whenever I look at you, I see Rei. Rei, bleeding, dead, gone. How can I live with that? How am I supposed to trust you when his face haunts me?

I can't. I can't forgive you. Not yet.

Don't you get it, Shadow? I was just a little kid... A child with bright dreams of the future: living on Earth with you and Rei and Grandfather. But you crushed that. Took it away from me. Now I can only dream of dying on this cold ship, all alone.

You don't remember. I know. And... I know you're not the same.

Once there was a monster. I could feel that "something" inside you, but I told myself that you'd never let it escape. Until you did. Now it's faded, but how can I trust you to control that when you've already...?

I won't. I can't. But this is just the beginning. We're together again now, whether we like it or not.

What was it that drew you to me, all those years ago? What was it that brought us together? Thinking about those things I'd almost forgotten, I always wondered if you saw it too. I can't explain it. It's something like a star, a tether, like gravity. Is that why you're here again?

I'm scared. But I don't want to just let that go. Even after everything, why do I still want to be your friend? Why do I keep trying to save you from that monster?

Maybe. That's the only promise I can make now.

The reunited duo walked on in silence for what seemed like hours. Shadow, oblivious to Maria's wondering stares, was focused on keeping them away from cameras and the occasional soldier. He didn't know anything about the layout of the ship, but looking at his small companion's cowering form, he figured he wouldn't get much in the way of information out of her right now.

Maria herself followed like a blind sheep, too afraid to question the hedgehog's motives. She knew that if he really intended to kill her, it would be long done with by now, so she was able to relax a bit. But whenever she tried to think rationally, that old terror surfaced again.

Shadow, always alert, noticed the moment the footsteps behind him stopped. He turned, crossing his arms. "What is it?"

Maria stood in the middle of the hallway, the same stricken expression on her face as she slowly looked up. "Shadow... Where are we going?" Her posture told him she wasn't moving voluntarily unless she got an answer.

Shadow sighed deeply. He knew this topic was going to come up eventually; he hardly expected her to say nothing the whole journey. "You're not going to like it." Maria stared at him. "I'll tell you while we're walking. We don't have time to stand around."

The child obliged, picking up the pace. Shadow looked away as she approached. "We're escaping the ARK."

Maria came to a rough halt, her voice sharply raising pitch. "We're escap - ?!"

"Shh!" Shadow covered her mouth and pulled her into a dark side room, much to her muffled protest. Footsteps thundered past the door and shouts could be heard disappearing down the hall.

The hedgehog frowned. This kid had no common sense at all, did she? He let go of the struggling girl and she stumbled back into an old chair, falling into it.

Shadow conjured a weak ball of chaos in his palm, lighting up the room with soft blue glow. The two were crammed into a dusty storage closet packed with various items of furniture and broken science equipment.

"The G.U.N. soldiers are looking for us," Shadow said flatly. "We need to stay hidden. And *quiet*."

Maria lowered her voice to a whisper. "What is this all about?" she demanded, her face a mix of shock and indignation at having been so severely left out of the loop.

Shadow looked at the light, dancing like a fire in his palm as it lit them electric blue. "The Professor learned that G.U.N. is coming to this ship to execute me. Without me, there would be no hope for your survival. So he told me to escape the ARK with you." He closed his palm into a fist, muffling the light. "Those are my orders, so I am forced to follow them, whether either of us like it or not."

Maria lifted her hand to her mouth. "But G.U.N. has always been our ally... Why would they...?"

"I don't know." Shadow relaxed his fist, the light escaping from its enclosure. He looked at the girl, his questioning eyes burning brighter than the chaos energy in his hand. "Maria... What have I done to deserve this? Is it my existence that's dangerous? Just the fact that I was even created?"

The girl stared at him. He really didn't know... Shadow truly believed he was innocent. It wasn't her place to tell him otherwise, to shatter that constructed illusion by telling him he had taken a life already.

Besides... if he didn't remember his past, then chances were, he would never have any desire to hurt her. To hurt anyone.

It wasn't fair, of course. He got to forget, while she had to keep living with Rei's memory. But it didn't matter. Telling Shadow the truth... That would be spiteful, only done to make him suffer. And cruelty was something Maria was incapable of.

Maria stood, her gaze determined and jaw set. "No one deserves to die just for being alive."

She looked down, finally smothering the part of her that had flourished for the past five years. The side that hated Shadow, wanted him to live with the same pain she had. That person... that wasn't her, and it was as much a monster as the demons she'd been running from. *E ver yone* should have a chance to live, even someone who'd hurt her.

"It's true that you're dangerous," Maria said, turning towards him, blue eyes lit like lightning in the dark. "But if you can control your powers and don't misuse them... As long as you don't hurt people... Then you should be allowed to live, just like everybody else!"

Shadow stared wide-eyed at the child standing proud before him. So small, so that he was nearly as tall as her, and yet so brave with her words. *That's it*, he thought, *t hat's the thing about her that I had forgotten*. The strength hiding within such a fragile vessel.

That was the first sign of compassion he had ever seen; even the Professor had treated him distantly. Like his life wasn't worth anything, less than any animal. Or like he wasn't even alive at all.

But this girl spoke to him like he was real. Even though she was clearly afraid of him, she still treated him like a person. The first human to tell him that he deserved to live.

"I won't," he said quietly. "I won't abuse my powers."

Maria looked away at that, relief spreading through her. "I know it seems strange for me to say something like that." She smiled faintly.

"But I think that everyone deserves a chance to realize their dreams."

Shadow, allowing the chaos to dissipate and ushering Maria outside, paused. "My... dreams?"

Maria walked beside him, finally allowing herself to somewhat relax in Shadow's company. "You know... the things you hope and wish will happen in the future, even if they seem unlikely."

The hedgehog looked down, confusion set on his face. He'd never really thought about anything like that before. Long ago, he had accepted that he would never leave his prison. Now, he had only done so under orders.

"Haven't you ever had a dream?" Maria pressed, suddenly concerned. She'd never thought of that, even before. What had Shadow wished for himself, beyond the cold whiteness of his cell?

"I did..." he replied, not knowing why that certainty had suddenly overtaken him. "Once." Beyond that, his memories refused to dive any further.

They travelled for a long time, not speaking, both of them lost in thought. Together they walked, side by side, but a wall still lingered between them. Maria couldn't bring herself to fully let go of her fears - it wasn't that easy.

But even so, they were beginning to fix their broken friendship. Piece by piece, it would be a struggle, but maybe someday they could heal.

After a while, Shadow brought them back to reality. "We've been wandering aimlessly for too long. Do you know anything about the layout of this ship?"

Maria paused, thinking. "If we're trying to get off the ARK, then we'd have to get to the hangar." The hedgehog nodded; that's what the

Professor had said. "That's on the bottom floor, and we're near the top."

Shadow sighed in exasperation. "Is there some sort of elevator?"

"It's in the middle. We're already almost there. I think - "

Maria didn't have time to say what she thought as shouts erupted from down the hall, drawing out soldiers from the nearby rooms.

"The escaped experiment! Don't move!"

At the end of the hallway stood a small group of G.U.N. guards, weapons pointed straight at Shadow. Despite their opaque visors, Maria could see the terror painted on their faces.

The girl was prepared to run for her life, but Shadow's hand on her arm stopped her. His narrowed eyes told her that he had a plan. Maria considered bolting anyway, but remained locked to his side.

The three guards thundered down the hall, keeping a healthy few yards between them. One of them fruitlessly tried to conceal his shaking as he kept Shadow at gunpoint and radioed in his location, while the other two held their weapons in the air.

"What do we do with them?" the first soldier asked, low enough so that only Shadow could hear them.

"That thing's dangerous! Kill it!" the second hissed.

The third, the only one pointing his gun at Shadow, looked back. "What about the kid?"

As his attention went off him, the hedgehog took his chance. Hyper-dashing forward, a trail of gold chaos in his wake, he sent the three soldiers crashing to the ground.

Maria took the opportunity to run past them before they could recover, and Shadow was soon behind her. He cast a glance behind him, only to see five more soldiers approaching from behind.

"Take my hand!" he yelled at Maria. She hesitated, holding her arm in front of her. "Just do it!"

Squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to calm the panic, she followed his order. Shadow hopped into the air, activating his hover shoes and jolting Maria forward.

The girl felt like her arm was being pulled off, but she sped up to keep the pace. Tripping along, somehow, her legs didn't fail her. To Shadow's credit he tried to run as slowly as he could so he wouldn't hurt the kid, but with five guns at their back, they weren't in a good position. If they didn't have such a large head start they'd surely be filled with bullets by now.

"There it is!" Maria cried as they turned down a hallway. The shiny metal elevator greeted them at the other end like a beacon.

Maria slammed the call button and collapsed inside as the door instantly opened. Screams from the frantic guards echoed down the hallway, and bullets sprayed above their heads as they went down.

Shadow stared at the glinting buttons, unsure how to work this strange machine, but luckily had enough common sense to hit the one marked "Hangar". The doors slid closed, shutting out the guards.

Shadow looked at Maria and crouched down himself. "You okay?"

The frail girl was practically hyperventilating, struggling to breathe after that sprint. She nodded mutely, catching her breath a moment later. "Are we safe now?"

Shadow shook his head. "They're smart enough to know where we're going. We're caught right in their web." A phrase he'd heard in a book once - it seemed more than fitting now. He paused, averting his eyes from her terrified face. "When that door opens... Run. They're not after you."

Maria looked down. "I couldn't leave you behind."

The serious hedgehog smiled slightly. Her worry for him was... cute. "I can take care of myself. Besides, if you're here, that means you could get shot or hit by one of my chaos blasts. The Professor will be less than pleased if I get you killed."

This reminder of her uselessness was sobering, and Maria kept her eyes locked with the metal indents in the ground. Shadow paused, thinking. "If I'm not there in an hour... or if soldiers are coming... Just go."

The reluctant look on her face wasn't lost on him. "I'll catch up with you on Earth. Probably just got caught up teaching these soldiers a lesson."

The truth was, Shadow knew that there might be too many soldiers for even him. He wasn't truly immortal. His body could heal from almost anything, but it needed time to repair itself. Too much damage, too many bullets, and...

He didn't really care about this girl. She was under his protection because of the Professor's orders, that was all. But he wasn't heartless. He could just have easily given no advice and let her fend for herself as he fought off the soldiers. She'd probably get caught in the crossfire and then he'd have nothing to worry about.

But he didn't want to see the kid die.

Shadow looked askance at the girl. In fact, he seemed to care about her welfare more than he probably should. Getting too close to anyone would be silly... They'd become a crutch, just a tool to slow him down. He would keep her alive, as he'd been commanded to, and once she was delivered safely to the Professor... he'd go.

But for now, he needed to worry about getting that far.

Gerald was beginning to get worried.

It'd been nearly an hour since he'd sent Shadow on his way, and the hedgehog was nowhere to be found. Of course, it was better that way, but he hadn't caught a glimpse of him or Maria on the cameras. There was almost no chance of them remaining undetected the whole way, even with the ARK's limited surveillance... The ship was swarming with soldiers.

No news is good news, he thought grimly, but he was having a hard time believing it. What if something had happened to them? Or what if, against all the safeguards, Shadow had defied - ?

Static began blaring through the radio as a voice screeched to life. "Commander, we've caught sight of the experiment!"

The older man narrowed his eyes, his gaze glued to the cameras. "Where are you?"

"Floor B. They've gone into the elevator."

"They?"

"The experiment appears to be travelling with a child."

He glanced back with raised eyebrows, but he had to be sure. "Description."

"A girl around 4'3, blonde hair, pale skin, dressed in a blue dress or skirt."

The Commander smirked at Gerald, though there was something dark and knowing behind his eyes. "Looks like we've found your little granddaughter, eh, Professor?" He turned back to the radio before he could catch the man's glare. "What are you waiting for? I want guards stationed at every exit! Go, go, go!"

He slammed the transceiver down on the desk and turned towards the screens, examining buttons and menus in a vain attempt to find

the elevator controls. "How the hell do you work this thing?"

"The pilot knew. But you killed him," Gerald said dryly.

The Commander muttered obscenities under his breath as he tried to navigate the panels. Much to the Professor's dismay, he managed to stumble upon the elevator controls and promptly shut the machine off mid-transit.

Gerald could barely stop himself from rolling his eyes. "And what has that done? Now you can't get to them."

"Now." The Commander grinned. "We wait. Your experiment, as you report, can lift several tons. It and your precious granddaughter will either starve in there, or they'll break out, right into the guns of my men. Either way..." He chuckled. "I win."

The Professor eyed the man but said nothing. Shadow was strong... stronger than anyone could ever dream of. A few feet of metal wouldn't be enough to stop him... Nor would a handful of soldiers. At least, he had to hope so.

Please be safe, Maria, he prayed. Please try to trust Shadow, so he can keep you alive. He's all you have now.

Ding... ding...

Maria watched the lights flashing as they reached each floor. They were almost there. Just two more levels, and...

The two were sent to the floor as the elevator rattled and screeched to a halt. It went pitch black as the ominous, rumbling noise of the power shutting down filled the room. A moment later, red emergency lights snapped on.

Maria stood, visibly shaking. "S-Shadow, what's happening?"

The dark hedgehog's eyes narrowed. "They cut the power."

"We're trapped in here?!"

Shadow got up and stretched casually. "Relax, Maria."

"How can you tell me to relax when we're going to die in a metal box?!" Maria screeched, sliding back down the wall. She wasn't usually so blunt, but the idea of suffocating in this tiny prison was enough to make her panic.

Shadow's face hardened. He grabbed Maria's arm and pulled her up, ruby red meeting icy blue. "We're *not* going to die." He let the startled child go and turned, putting his hand on the door. "Solid steel. If I had something to pry open the door with... I guess I'll just have to try something else."

"What are you - "

Maria was interrupted by a deafening crash as Shadow, with a chaos-fueled punch, blasted a gaping hole in the door. With a grunt, he pried the metal apart then stood back, rubbing his bruised knuckles. "Ow."

The girl was rather shaken by the sudden loud noise, but she crept timidly after Shadow as he jumped through the hole a few feet off the ground. His fist had gone straight through both the elevator doors and a foot of solid metal wall. Maria hopped down, but only had a moment to catch her breath before hundreds of footsteps began thundering down the hall.

"Go, go!" Shadow whispered. The two ran off, disappearing down another hallway.

Luckily for them, the large group of soldiers soon lost the trail. Though Maria was less familiar with this floor, the layout was all but identical, and she easily led them around bends, dodging cameras all the way.

Finally, they ducked into a small side room, stacked with a few silver crates. At first glance it was otherwise bare, but Shadow noticed a gap in the wall.

"The vent," Shadow pointed out. "We can sleep there. There'll be a hundred soldiers crawling this floor looking for us tonight. If we hide here, they might think we moved on, and they'll have to spread out."

Maria nodded. Not like she had a better idea. As she helped Shadow search the crates for a screwdriver, she noticed the bulge of some item in her pocket and reached in.

To her surprise, her hands clasped around her reading light. She'd forgotten that she had always carried the old thing around, though she hadn't been on any nightly adventures in a long time. The girl flicked the switch. Still good.

Shadow pulled a screwdriver out of one of the boxes and set to work unscrewing the vent. He motioned for her to crawl inside, which she did, warily. No adult or even a large child would fit in there, but even with her small size, it was still cramped and dark.

After replacing the vent cover, Shadow was soon behind her. They crawled far enough in to reach a T-section, and Maria managed to turn herself. She tried to sit up, but after sitting hunched over for a moment, decided that laying on her stomach was more comfortable.

Shadow, a whole foot shorter than her, was able to sit normally.

"Tomorrow, we'll have to sneak past the guards. I think we can cross the entire floor in about half a day, maybe more if we're held up. Do you know how far down we are?"

"I think we're on the lower residential floor," Maria replied. "So it's just the cargo floor, then the hangar."

"Residential... which means civilians. That could be a problem."

Maria thought for a moment. "The middle of the floor, where we are, is mostly a lot of living rooms and cafeterias and stuff. The actual bedrooms are on the outer rings."

The hedgehog nodded, still planning the next day in his mind. Silence lingered between them for the next several minutes, and it seemed like the two were going to sleep without another word.

But Maria still had questions. Questions she wasn't sure how to ask this person who was both not the monster and not her friend. Gathering her courage, she spoke up again, staring at the ceiling as she talked. "Shadow... Do you really not remember me?"

The hedgehog looked down at the shiny metallic floor, lit up by her tiny light. "You say we've met before, but I can't remember that at all." Idly she flicked the tiny light's switch, on and off and on again. "Do you know why I've forgotten everything?"

Maria stiffened and swallowed, her thumb going still on the switch. She kept her eyes open; if she closed them for even a second, Rei would be there. "I know."

"That's why you're scared of me... Isn't it?" The girl didn't move, but her pale eyes hazed over, distant. He took her lack of response as a confirmation. "What did I do, Maria?"

The girl turned away, darkness greeting her. "I..." That old feeling, the choking, words stuck under her tongue, returned in full force. That feeling that had killed Rei. "I can't talk about it."

"Maria..." He hesitated, a glimmer of his old self shining through. "I don't want you to be afraid of me."

She turned back, fire in her eyes. "I'm not afraid of *you*, I'm just... afraid."

Shadow stared at her. With the way she'd been looking at him... how could he believe that was true? "I'm not going to hurt you. If it helps, I

couldn't even if I wanted to. Anything the Professor says... I can't disobey him no matter what I want."

Maria stilled as her breath caught in her throat, memories of that day flooding back to her in bloody waves of regret. Her grandfather standing there holding the microphone, his voice commanding and emotionless.

Shadow, kill Rei.

Kill him now.

She stopped fighting it, allowing her eyes to slide shut, and there was her old friend. Bleeding, fading, reaching out for her and falling away. If what Shadow had said was true... then maybe forgiving him was possible. But how could she just forget poor, innocent Rei, who swore himself to her protection? Rei, who had been so unjustly murdered?

Was that really only Grandfather's fault...?

"You're different, Shadow," Maria said softly. "But I just don't know if I can trust you yet." She shut the light off for the last time, signalling the end of the conversation.

The hedgehog sat back against the cold metal, and his voice pierced the darkness. "Then you don't have to." He closed his eyes. Looked much the same. "I promised the Professor that I would protect you, and I will. I'm not going to force you to like it."

Maria, laying still, gave no indication that she was listening. But Shadow kept talking anyway. "Whatever I've done... That's in the past now. And all I can do is hope I don't make the same mistake again."

All was quiet after that. Shadow half-slept, one ear pricked for any sound of danger even as he fell asleep. But Maria lay awake for a long time, thinking about everything and nothing.

I hope, she thought as drowsiness began to wrap its tendrils around her, I hope that I can forgive him...

Finally she began to drift away, submitting to the darkness and sailing away to a black, dreamless sleep. She did. She wanted to be Shadow's friend. She wanted to go back, or if they couldn't, to make something new.

But more than that, there was still something else.

I hope I can forgive myself...

Because whatever excuses she made, in the end she always told herself that it was no one's fault but her own.

Enough

I can't escape her. Not even in my dreams.

When I sleep, it's only fleetingly. As I drift away, I see her... silently screaming across a wall of glass. It's a weak wall; I could break through it if I tried. But I can never move to her, or cross that flimsy barrier. Not until she's already slipping away. And then it's too late.

And I wake in a panic, searching. The quiet sound of her uneven breathing calms me. She's still here.

Is it the thought of being alone that frightens me? Or is it this girl... This tiny, weak, insignificant girl?

Why do I care?

That's the question that plagues me; keeps me staring into the darkness, seeking some sort of answer from the shadows. Before now, I had no care for humans or Faunas. I looked up to the Professor, and I respected whatever orders he gave me. That was all. Nothing else mattered.

But now... This kid, Maria, she's made me feel something. Before, I was numb. Drifting, carrying on from one day to another, dead on my feet. The Professor was right. I was a creature... a thing... nothing at all. But around Maria, there's a solid sense of existence. She makes me feel... real. Alive.

I had been sleeping my entire life, and now, finally, I'm waking up.

Sitting there, eyes closed as I listen to her erratic breaths, I realized something. I don't want to go.

I don't have to leave as soon as I reunite her with the Professor. I could stay. Isn't she sick? Aren't I tied to her survival, somehow? If I abandoned her... that might be her death sentence.

I have all the time in the world. She only has what little her human life grants her. Every day, she struggled and fought with her mortality, scraping up just a bit more time, a few more hours of life. She can't be weak when every day is a war waged against herself.

Maybe Maria is stronger than I thought. Maybe she's stronger than me.

When she wakes, he's hovering above her, features eerie in the small pocket light's glow. Before yesterday, she might have screamed or cried. Now she was calm except for a small jolt at seeing the face, both familiar and unknown, staring down on her. She could scarcely remember where she was.

And then it all came back to her. Shadow. The escape. And, she realized with a shudder, how close to death they had skirted. She wasn't stupid enough to believe that her age made her untouchable, especially if there were guards firing indiscriminately at Shadow when she was nearby.

Until that moment, she hadn't really realized *just* what she'd gotten herself into.

Maria then noticed his hand on her shoulder, but much to her surprise, she didn't feel the urge to shrink back. Maybe it was the drowsiness dulling her fear. Or maybe things were shifting between them.

"It's time." Shadow retracted his hand.

Maria sat up as best she could. "The guards...?"

"I checked before I woke you up. They're mostly gone."

This was life now. Hiding, fleeing, fearing for her life at every turn. It had only been a day, but it felt like a million years since yesterday. Then, she had been a child. Sure, she was no normal kid living

without a care in the world, but at least she hadn't been too concerned with just *surviving* .

When she snapped out of her thoughts, Shadow was looking at her strangely. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." She brushed a few blond strands out of her face. "Just... tired." That was true, at least.

The hedgehog began to crawl out of the vents, her light clasped in one hand. "I've never really experienced that. I can go - "

" - 'up to 10 days without sleep, 30 without water, 90 without food. About half of each of those with nearly no negative effects. It takes over 8000 Newtons of force to break a bone, hundreds of bullets in non-core locations before damage, and you have about 10 times more energy capacity than an average human.'" Maria quoted the words burned into her memory.

Shadow stared.

"Even after I stopped coming," the girl mumbled, "I couldn't stop reading about you. I stole Grandfather's research papers before he sent them to G.U.N."

Shadow crawled out of the vent and stood, stretching. "Research, huh?" He examined his arm, perfectly mended, not even slightly disjointed. "I guess I know why the Professor did all of that now."

Maria's skin was already light, but at this she paled to a ghostly pallor. "Those weren't just estimates?! He actually did all of that?!"

"For science," Shadow said bitterly. Maria looked like she was about to be sick, so he quickly continued, "The only thing that hurt much was the bone, and they couldn't even break it."

"That's awful!"

Shadow shrugged nonchalantly. "It's better to know your limits." He helped Maria out of the vent, pulling her to her feet. "Come on. The sooner we're off this floor, the better."

They slipped out of the tiny closet, careful to leave no indication that they were ever there. As they travelled on, the hallways remained empty and quiet - eerily so, from Maria's perspective. The residential floors were always bustling with life, full of civilians and off-duty workers, their chatter raising up a clamour through the halls.

Now, it was like those thousands of people had just disappeared. Where could they be - had G.U.N. taken them all? Were they alone on the ship?

The answer to this question did not take long to arrive. Soon, they heard distant voices drifting down the halls. Peering around the corner, Shadow confirmed it as he saw a group of soldiers milling around outside a door. Within came the shrill voice of a female.

"They're interrogating the civilians," Shadow whispered to Maria. "We'll have to backtrack and try a different way."

Turning the corner as they walked away, the hedgehog found himself face-to-face with a single soldier, so close they'd nearly run into each other. Dumbstruck, the man gaped at Shadow, then quickly came to his senses.

He opened his mouth to shout, but Shadow's reflexes were faster. Grabbing the man, he covered his mouth and pulled him to the floor. His head cracked on the metal, eyes rolling back as he went limp.

Maria winced. When the hedgehog stepped back, she crouched by the soldier, cradling his head in her lap. Shadow looked on in confusion as she pressed the skirt into his bleeding head. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure he's okay." She began to struggle with the man, trying in vain to lift him up enough to take his jacket off. "Help me!"

Reluctantly, he did, pulling the unconscious soldier up. Maria set his head in the jacket, wrapping the sleeves so it would soak up most of the blood. Then she helped Shadow go through his pockets.

The girl nearly dropped the gun as she pulled it out of its holster. She looked away quickly, hands shaking as she shoved it at Shadow.

Maria couldn't even look at a gun anymore. Not after that night. Rei had saved her and killed her, both.

"Good, we're not completely helpless now," Shadow said, checking the clip. It was missing one bullet. He turned back to Maria, who was still tending to the man. "Why are you helping the enemy? He would have killed us."

Maria looked down at the soldier and brushed his mousy brown hair out of his face. This was a person doing what he was told. He didn't have a choice to where G.U.N. took him; he just followed their orders. Maybe, if it wasn't for the organization's corruption, he would never even think of doing this.

Or maybe he was happy - maybe this was exactly what he wanted. Yet she wondered, if he knew that Shadow wasn't really a bad person, if he knew how much he'd once meant to a little kid with no friends, would he really have chosen to come here?

Maybe. Maybe not.

"Not everyone who opposes you is an enemy," she said quietly. The words were lyrical, like a distant memory of a passage in a book.

"That doesn't even make sense."

Maria looked up and smiled faintly. "I guess that word, 'enemy', it implies that they're all just bad people. But that's not true. Sometimes good people do bad things."

She thought of Rei, the deranged stare that had marred his face as he emptied his gun into the doctor. Even if he had deserved it, that didn't mean taking a life so violently, in front of a sensitive child no less, wasn't terrible. But in many ways, Rei was justified. He was a good person who had done something bad out of necessity. He could be excused.

And Shadow... Maybe he was the same, a good person who had made a mistake. Or just hadn't been strong enough to stop it.

"Sometimes bad people do bad things," Shadow retorted flatly.

Before Maria could argue, a shout erupted from down the hall where the group of soldiers were. "Owens! Where the 'ell are ya?!" Loud footsteps tramped down the hall, coming quickly towards them.

Shadow pulled Maria to her feet and dragged her into the nearest side room. They only had a moment. In the faint moonlight, they were able to make out the silhouettes of crates stacked haphazardly about the room, and not much else. They had to hide, but where?

Running for the back of the room, they heard from outside the door, "What the - Hey! I need backup!"

Maria stumbled upon a huge crate that had tipped on its side, the lid missing and contents emptied. She and her companion dove into it. The box was just large enough for Maria to sit up straight, but it was a cramped space. With their close proximity and his keen hearing, Shadow could hear her heart pounding.

Maria gasped and grabbed Shadow's arm as the door slammed open, banging against the wall. The hedgehog jumped and tensed, his grip tightening on the gun. She had to relax or she was going to give them away!

"Hey! We know you're in here! Come out and maybe we won't kill you, eh?" one of the soldiers shouted. Heavy boots tramped around the room, and clatters resounded as they kicked over boxes.

Flashlights clicked on and began to rove about, the lights drawing close to their crate. As a flash briefly illuminated their hiding place, Shadow could see terror etched on Maria's face. She knew that if these men found them... Shadow would be killed, and likely her along with him.

The hedgehog's annoyance melted. She was just a kid, and she was being as brave as she possibly could. Any other child might have screamed or cried and given them away.

One of the soldiers walked right up in front of them and stopped. Maria stared at his boots, shiny and black. If they were found, those gleaming shoes would soon be covered in her blood.

The man raised his gun and emptied his clip into the ceiling, yelling as he did so. Startled, Maria's hands flew to her mouth to suppress a whimper of fear. She shrunk down into the corner as far as she could.

"Briggs! Shut the hell up, will you?"

"Sorry, boss. Just thought I could scare 'em out."

"Go over there and dump all the crates. I know they're hiding here."

Shadow tensed. They'd be found for sure now. He needed to have the element of surprise or they would never have a chance.

He moved into a crouch as another soldier began to walk down the aisle. Just jump out, one shot to the head. He'd heard two other voices, so he could quickly identify their locations, and hopefully take them out before they got him. His body went taut, preparing to strike.

Maria, realizing what he was about to do, reached forward and took his arm again. She shook her head, eyes wide, and gently tugged at him. Though he was tempted to ignore her, Shadow allowed himself to fall back.

She didn't let go of him this time, clinging to his arm, searching for some small comfort. Once they had him, they might have stopped searching for her. She'd have been safe. But it didn't matter. Even though she had mixed feelings about Shadow right now, the old fear still creeping up whenever she let her guard down, she couldn't be alone.

And she didn't want Shadow to die.

The soldier continued down the line, items crashing to the ground as he tipped crates over. Shadow still held the gun tight, ready to spring out and fire at a moment's notice.

Eventually the first man called out, "Let's just go, boys. They're not in here. Probably just some civilian who freaked out anyway."

Shadow and Maria held their breaths until the door whirred and slid shut, making sure that three pairs of boots had stomped out of the room before they let out a collective sigh of relief. Safe, for now at least.

"We have to stay," Shadow said, his voice barely a whisper. "They might still be out there."

Maria dug out her pocket light again and flicked it on, squinting in the sudden light. It flickered, dimming. Almost dead. "Okay."

Shadow, always to the point, only paused for a moment before turning to her. "Why did you stop me?" The girl sat there mutely, so he continued, "You don't have to worry about me. I can take care of -"

"It's not that," Maria interrupted. Nervously, she picked at the hem of her sleeves.

"What, then?"

Much to Shadow's surprise, the girl's steady expression faltered and she began to cry. It was the first time she had shed a tear in five years. She'd held it in until now, refusing to accept her past, trying and trying to move on. But how could she push it away when the past was sitting right in front of her?

Sniffing, she wiped her eyes. "So many people have died because of me, Shadow... My parents, my friend, maybe even the people on this ship; they're all gone just because of my existence. Isn't that enough?"

Shadow's eyes widened. What horror had this girl been through?

"Nobody else should have to die," she said, not bothering to resist the second wave of tears. "I don't want to lose my last friend too!"

The hedgehog stared at her. "Maria..."

A friend... That was a new concept to Shadow. What was friendship to him, anyway? From the books he had read, it had seemed like something silly and superficial. Fragile, ready to snap at a moment's notice.

This was different. They didn't play around like kids, or talk about their interests, like the friends he had read about. If that was the sort of relationship they had, it would mean little to Shadow.

But this felt more... tenacious. More real. He'd been ignoring it, pushing it away to focus on the task at hand, but he'd felt that connection the moment the door standing between them slid open.

And yet, he didn't want to classify it as friendship, because that implied a closeness he wasn't ready for. She was a human, and he was immortal. Eventually, even if whatever sickness she had didn't end her life early, she would wither away and die. And then, having relied so heavily on this human, what would he do then?

I don't have a choice, he realized. No matter how he wanted to feel... it was undeniable. He'd never cared about anyone but himself before. But now he wanted her to be safe and happy, even if it meant him getting hurt, and what was friendship but that?

This child, this small, weak, innocent girl, was opening a heart he'd never known he had. And there was nothing he could do to stop it. So he took her hand, offering her whatever small comfort, whatever worthless friendship someone like him could give. He held it until the light dimmed, flickered, and finally went out.

Maria's stomach grumbled in protest as she tramped along after Shadow. It had been well over half a day since she'd had any food, and she was beginning to weaken. Eyes still red, the girl sniffed, then blushed in embarrassment. Remembering the breakdown, her hunger was forgotten for the moment.

Luckily for her, Shadow's social cues were well below par, so he didn't seem to realize that it was something worth being embarrassed over. She was spared that at least.

"I'm hungry," she mumbled.

Shadow tossed her the apple he had snatched from the soldier's pocket. She fumbled but managed to catch it. "Take it. No use in saving it when we're only going to be here another day at the most."

She looked down at the apple hungrily. Still shiny, though bruised from the man's hard fall. But remembering that Shadow hadn't eaten either, she held it back out. "We could split it. Aren't you hungry?"

"Ninety days, remember? You need it more than I do."

Maria knew he was right, so she ate it.

Truth be told, Shadow felt hunger gnawing at him just like any normal creature, but he'd learned to tune it out. He glanced at Maria.

She was weak enough as it was.

Of all the hundreds of scientists who had stared at him through the glass, their beady eyes trained on him for hours, he had never seen one as thin as her. She was tiny, but despite being underweight, her features were soft and round. Like a little downy bird, and just as fragile.

After travelling through the vacant halls for nearly an hour, the duo stumbled upon a storage area. Peering through the doorways, they found rooms filled with boxes and supplies. They were in a T-section, with a single hallway curving sharply to the left.

Shadow surveyed the area, one hand on his hip. "We won't be here long, but we're still going to need food once we get to Earth. We should split up and try to find supplies."

"S-split up?" Maria stuttered.

"Relax. If someone comes after you, just scream. I'll hear it." Maria didn't look reassured, but she knew they'd be here all day if they stuck together. "I'm going that way. You start here and make your way down. Just try to find food or other supplies, and we should meet up in about an hour."

With that, he was off, disappearing down the hall. *He's only a bit away*, Maria thought, trying and failing to comfort herself as she stepped into a storage room and timidly picked through the crates.

I have nothing to be afraid of. Shadow was what made her a target at all. Without him, she was just a little girl. Her age made her immune. Invincible. Right? Who would shoot a lone child?

About fifteen minutes later, she had gone through every crate in the room, but discovered little of interest. In the last box, she found a bag of nondescript dried food and immediately devoured it. She promised herself that she would save the next thing she found for Shadow, but she was still hungry.

As she finished the tasteless meal, a sound pierced the rooms: a woman's cry. Straightening quickly, she peeked into the hall. At the end of it stood a door, the metal cracked slightly open. Light streamed into the moodily lit hallway.

"... can't do this! I have a child!" Maria heard as she came into earshot.

"You expect me to believe he's never even heard of the girl, when he's the only other kid on the ship?" a harsh male voice growled. "If you're not harbouring Maria Robotnik and the experiment, then you know where they are!"

"I know nothing!" the woman spat.

Maria's eyes widened as she crept up to the door, peeking in, only to find a familiar face through the crack. A woman she knew as Mrs. Tower, as in Maria-honey-please-call-me-Lucy Mrs. Tower, mother to Abraham.

Six-year-old Abraham was the only friend Maria had had for the past five years. Though the little boy was not the best for conversational material, he loved Maria almost as much as he loved his parents. The cute child, with his silver hair, charming bicoloured eyes, and blindingly bright smile, had brought the traumatized Maria back to the world.

Now the child was unusually stoic, sitting straight-faced next to his mother. Mrs. Tower's hair hung in her face, her eyes, normally soft and kind, burning with rage. But with her arms tied back behind the chair, she couldn't even wipe the trickle of blood off her mouth. While Abraham's cheeks had clear tear stains, he now sat in silence.

His eyes, one decidedly dark brown and the other an intense green, drifted over to her. A smile began to creep up. Maria put her finger to her lips, like she did when they competed to see who could stay quiet the longest (Maria, of course, always won). The little boy's eyes

snapped away and his smile faded. Even at his age, he understood that it wasn't time to play.

What could Maria do? If she intruded upon the brutal interrogation, she might buy them time, but then she'd be captured. And with only Maria located, the interrogation would just continue. So she watched and waited.

"We've already killed your husband," the soldier said, and pulled out his gun, training it on Abraham's terrified eyes. He'd already seen that gun make his father go flat, and he knew what it meant. "Who will you let die next?"

Lucy struggled, black hair flying out. "Leave my child alone; he has nothing to do with this!"

"Tell us where the experiment and the girl are!"

It was at that moment that Lucy's eyes, as bright green as one of her son's, met Maria's. The young girl shrank back, preparing to run if Mrs. Tower told them where she was hiding. But the mother's eyes only brushed over her for a second, and she looked back at the guards with determination.

" *Never,*" she hissed.

The soldier turned his gun away from Abraham and shot her in the head. It happened so fast that Maria and Abraham didn't comprehend it until Lucy slumped down, only held up by her bindings. Abraham screamed and burst into tears, and he was quickly shoved down by the soldier.

When the boy stopped his struggles, curling up into himself and sobbing, the soldier stepped back and holstered his gun. "Bitch," he said, his words spitting on her corpse.

At the same time as all this happened, Maria gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. She was reminded of Rei again, the scientist's

shocked expression going blank as his brain was loaded with bullets. But Mrs. Tower had been innocent, and that soldier had murdered her.

Was this what was happening on the ARK...? Would the soldiers really kill them all, just to get to Shadow?

A guard, standing behind the door where Maria couldn't see him, heard her small sound. He slammed the button and thundered through the open door, startling Maria and making her fall onto her back.

"It's the kid! Grab her!" he yelled.

Maria recovered quickly, scrambling to her feet and dashing off, but she was doomed from the beginning. Though she managed to duck under the soldier's lunges at first, she barely made it back to the T-section before one of them yanked her back by her hair.

Maria had stopped cutting her hair a few years ago, letting it spill past her shoulders. She had just gotten tired of looking in the mirror and seeing that same scared girl. But she sincerely regretted growing it out now.

Her cry of pain was muffled by a hand covering her mouth. She struggled wildly, kicking and punching with all her tiny might. If she could just release the grip on her for one second...

With all the strength in her body, she pulled away from the hand enough to raise herself up and bite down hard. The soldier howled as her teeth sank into his flesh and let her go, into the arms of a second man. But she had her opportunity.

"SHADOW!" she screamed, before something hard collided with her head and she fell into the abyss again.

Shadow started violently. Maria's scream, a guttural cry like an animal close to death, ripped through the hall and shook him to the bone. He dropped everything he was holding and ran.

But at the last moment, just as he turned down the hall where he'd heard her, his senses came back to him. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins and he longed to tear apart whoever was hurting Maria, but he knew charging in recklessly would be stupid. So he carefully peered down the hall.

Their backs were to him, so he took the opportunity to rush down the corridor and dash into a side room, leaving the door ajar.

When he saw his young friend slumped on the ground, his hand curled into a fist, and it took all the will in his body not to charge in there right then. The hedgehog glanced at the gun in his other hand. He could kill them from here. There were only two.

Shadow cursed silently as ten more soldiers rounded the corner. There was no way he could get in there without either getting himself killed or catching Maria in the crossfire. They weren't going to kill her, more likely take her somewhere secure. Once she was safe, he would unleash all of his rage on these people.

He breathed a sigh of relief as Maria opened her eyes. Before she could move, one of the men hauled her up and slapped a pair of handcuffs on her, only merciful enough to cuff her in front rather than in the back. The girl was disoriented, too tired to struggle.

"So you're a squealer?" one of the soldiers asked her. Maria only stared at him with terrified blue eyes. "Nothin' to say? Looks like you're all bark and no bite."

"I wouldn't say that, Jenkins," another soldier snickered, pointing out the hand he was bandaging.

"Shut the hell up."

Jenkins shoved Maria forward and she fell, whimpering in pain as the handcuffs bit into her wrists. He grabbed her and picked her back up by her shirt, choking her, and pushed her again, albeit more gently. "Come on."

Shadow bristled at his rough treatment of her, but he knew there was nothing he could do. He would have to take that many out in one fell swoop to stand a chance of not being left a bullet-ridden corpse, but that would put Maria right into the fray. So he had no choice but to wait.

Or you could leave her, a niggling voice in his brain said. *She's not your problem anymore.*

Shadow considered it as he watched the group disappear down the hall. That was right - before he had no choice but to keep her alive and close by. Professor's orders. But now that she was gone, he had the ability to walk away. Gerald had no control over him now.

So he would leave. Maria would be left to her own fate, and he would escape to Earth. There he would not be held down by this "friendship", whatever that might even mean.

... He'd be alone. Back to the unfeeling, sealing away his heart for good.

Maria was a chain. She was... a liability. But...

He didn't want to leave her.

This wasn't the Professor's brainwashing. This was the first thing that Shadow had ever truly wanted, of his own will. He could leave her... but what would that prove? That he was a mindless creature acting only out of necessity? For once, he could make a decision not because of an order that was given to him, but in spite of it.

He made his first choice that day.

Their fates were entwined together now - a tangled, jumbled mess, but irreversibly knotted nonetheless. And he couldn't just leave that behind him. So he took off after the group, vowing to save her.

That was the dream, the wish, he had forgotten. He knew that now. It was coming back, the old promise, made at a time when there was nothing in his world but her. He couldn't fully understand it in the static that was his lost memories, but the conviction was still there.

I'll get you to Earth, Maria... I promise I'll take you to that place, even if it kills me. Even if it kills us both.

Reason

Stupid.

How could I have been so blind, to think I was immortal? That no one could ever hurt me just because I was a little girl? I thought it was Shadow they were after... But no, they want me too. I'd forgotten. I'm Gerald Robotnik's granddaughter. That makes me special, a target worth capture.

Worth blackmail. Worth killing, to scare him into submission.

I know my grandfather. He'd never let G.U.N. break him! Never! But if my life was in danger... his spirit would be crushed to nothing.

I want to be brave for Grandfather, so he doesn't have to be. I want to smile and believe that everything will be okay.

But the truth is, I've always been just a helpless child. Weak, stupid, small. I'm Gerald's granddaughter, but I didn't inherit that staple Robotnik cleverness. I'm not brave or strong or smart. I'm just a girl.

Where is Shadow? Didn't he say he would come?

Did he leave me behind...?

I wouldn't blame him. He could have been long off the ARK by now if it wasn't for me. What have I done to help him? What have I done to help myself? Nothing, nothing, nothing.

I can do nothing except sit here and wait for the end.

I'm sorry I couldn't be stronger. That's what all my friends showed me... Grandfather taught me to persevere. Rei taught me to survive. And Shadow taught me to hope; take chances, even when the world is against you. But I couldn't do any of that.

And now it doesn't matter. Because I'll never see them again.

Maria examined her surroundings.

That was the very first thing Gerald had told her to do, in one of their serious talks. The sort of conversations that parents usually had with their children: Bad people, self-defense, death.

Things that, Gerald always mused sadly, his son should have been talking with her about. But Jayden wasn't here anymore.

These were bits of information that the Professor thought Maria would need to know on Earth. He always held hope that she would get to spend her later childhood years there, if not her entire life. But he never imagined that she would need to know them here on the ARK.

Step 1: Assess the situation.

She was handcuffed. In the front, easier to get out of, but they were jammed tight to keep her small hands from slipping out. Maybe only one notch was loose.

There were at least ten guards surrounding her, all of them armed with an assault rifle and pistol, and a majority with a look on their face that meant business. Making a run for it was not an option. She'd be dead before she rounded the first corner.

Plus, dizziness was tugging at her, making every step forward difficult. Somewhat because of Jenkins' abuse, but mostly because she'd been clocked in the head with the butt of a gun and knocked clean out. There was no running or fighting right now.

Step 2: Remain calm. Show no signs of resistance.

Too late. She'd been feral, savage. She saw, as Jenkins unwrapped his bandage to examine the wound, that she had bit him to the bone.

Fifteen minutes later, he was still bleeding heavily. The bite of a wild animal. The soldiers were all on guard, looking at her with a mix of fear and disgust, as if she would tear their throats out.

Step 3: Wait for an opportunity.

Surrounded by a pack of armed guards, with her hands bound and no idea where they were taking her, she didn't see much of one coming any time soon.

In other words, Maria was completely, 100% screwed.

Shadow will come. Shadow will protect you, she reminded herself, as her anxiety built with each passing minute. *He promised.*

He promised.

He promised.

But Shadow didn't remember what that meant.

Maria knew it was a childish notion, but a promise wasn't just something made in passing. It was like a pact. You had to mean it, to at least try with all your heart to fulfill it.

To her, this was sacred. But Shadow didn't know. He didn't remember their hours-long talks about nothing and everything. He didn't remember swearing to take her to Earth. And he didn't remember their wish, their dream from long ago.

How can you doubt him? Maria reprimanded herself. But her mind retaliated, *Why wouldn't you?*

She didn't have an answer, so she went back to assessing the situation.

She recognized some of the soldiers here, by voice if not by face. Jenkins, of course. The one with the mean sneer. She had to avoid him, because he'd shoot her in a second.

Then there was Briggs. He was edging towards overweight, with corn-yellow hair falling over his head like a wet mop. His eyes were dim, lacking any sort of intelligence or curiosity, but he at least didn't have a mean look on his face. Maybe he could be manipulated or tricked. By anyone but her, at least.

The interrogator. He seemed disinterested, aloof, walking with his arms crossed. Nothing she could do about him. If she hadn't seen him shoot Mrs. Tower in the head, she might have chalked him up as harmless.

The rest, she knew little about. Except...

Owens, looking dazed, a proper bandage around his head now. He was the only one without a jacket, probably left behind after it'd been soaked with blood. His wild brown hair still drooped over his face, masking similarly coloured eyes.

He turned to look at her, having been forced to the back of the crowd before he could catch a glimpse of the prisoner, and stopped in his tracks. "Hey - "

Owens had only blurry memories of being knocked out, but he definitely remembered that girl, remembered reawakening for just a moment and seeing the upside down face of a little kid peering down at him. And just to confirm it, there was still a splotch of blood on her skirt where she'd pressed it to the wound.

Before, she had been vibrant, full of life. But now she looked broken and exhausted, the once-shiny gold hair a dull yellow mess, the flames behind her eyes beginning to flicker out.

"What is it, runt?" an one of the other soldiers asked. Owens was smaller than everyone else. "You seen this girl before?"

"She the one that knocked you out?" The group erupted into laughter.

Owens looked at Maria. She'd shown him kindness when she could have easily walked away, so he shut his mouth. "It's nothing."

But Jenkins was staring in interest at Owens now, the dark eyes turned deliberately away, and he stopped. With his good hand he seized Maria, her yelp of surprise drawing everyone's attention, and shoved her down to the floor. "Is that really true, Owens?" Jenkins asked the alarmed soldier.

Maria went still as she felt the muzzle of a pistol pressed to her head. Its cold metal seeped into her skin, a bomb about to explode. "Attacking a soldier is one thing... But two?" A twisted smile crossed Jenkins' lips as he gestured with his bandaged hand. "That's grounds for immediate execution."

Owens shifted uncertainly, avoiding the girl's pleading, terrified stare. "Jenkins, knock it off... The Commander just said to round up the civili - "

"So what?!" Maria whimpered as the weapon pressed harder into the bruise on her skull. "You've killed people just like the rest of us, so don't act so high and mighty! The Commander said when civilians are uncooperative, put them down." Jenkins' finger went to the trigger, all the amusement suddenly draining out of his expression. "And this brat's done *more* than enough to - "

" *Just shut up!*" At the sudden scream, a quiet swept over the band of soldiers. Owens glared them down, his hands tightened into fists. "Jesus, Jenkins, what the hell are you even doing? She's just a kid. Leave her alone already!"

Jenkins growled at being stood up to by the runt, but he felt then the stares of his comrades boring into him. He'd been right; all of them had taken lives today. But even they looked on silently, unsure. They'd been told they were here to put down a rogue experiment and the insurgents who had created him. This? This was too much.

After a long few moments - a few moments that felt like an hour to the girl with a gun pressed against her head - the soldier straightened and holstered his pistol. "I was just joking," he muttered. He tugged Maria to her feet, less forceful than before. "Get going, kid. You're fine."

Owens fell back from the crowd, head down and refusing to meet Maria's stare. She let out a deep breath, composing herself despite her shaking legs, and turned forward again.

Even she was beginning to doubt her belief that there was good in everybody, after the harsh treatment of G.U.N. Mrs. Tower, killed over nothing. And Jenkins threatening to do the same to her just for fighting back. But she and Shadow were both wrong. Even in such a horrible situation, there were still good people out there.

But she knew that would be the extent of the soldier's kindness. He might stand up for her, but he wasn't going to betray his comrades and his country by letting her go.

Rei had told her that the bond between people charged with the protection of others, whether they were elite soldiers or simple night guards, was unbreakable. So she had to cross him out of her mental list.

But if he couldn't help her escape... Then who could?

The rest of the hour-long walk passed without incident, and Jenkins kept his eyes locked firmly on the halls ahead. Guards began breaking off, until it was just Owens, Jenkins, the interrogator, and a soldier with wispy black hair. Finally, Maria spotted a door at the dead end of a hall. Their final destination.

Maria gaped as they stepped into the huge white room. In small packs of three or five sat at least thirty scientists and guards. There were no civilians, only people dressed in uniforms with high-ranking badges pinned to their breasts.

The girl, in her bright clothing, stood out among the sterile whites and dull blues. Lab coats rustled as the group stirred, a murmur emerging as they saw who the latest prisoner was.

"Shut up!" Jenkins yelled, and the room hushed.

Maria stared at the faces she passed by. Many were unfamiliar; others had tended to her before. She saw people that had been caring for her every day her whole life. Doctors who had listened to her prattling or tried to make her laugh. Guards who had stopped to slip her little presents of food or toys after Rei had been killed, mussing her hair as they continued their patrols.

She had been so blind. These people had loved her. Her whole life she had felt alone, but they had all each, in their own small ways, tried to make her life a little better.

Maria was forced to her knees next to two other scientists she had never met, probably part of a different division. The soldiers wasted no time in cuffing her ankles as well, so she couldn't even make a run for it now.

The four soldiers went to stand at the front of the room, and the interrogator spoke up, his voice booming across the large, empty space. "Do not forget, prisoners! You will all remain seated *where you are*. The penalty for any attempt at escape is immediate execution!"

"And," he continued, "I require SILENCE!" The crowd collectively flinched as his shout bounced off the walls. With that pleasant reminder, the four of them left the room, packed to the brim with people, to stand guard outside.

Silence, the interrogator received. Maria looked miserably at the shiny white floor, avoiding the stares of people all around her. Their eyes beseeched her, begging for answers she couldn't give. How was Shadow going to find her now?

"Hey! Hey, kid!"

Maria glanced up at the whisper and saw a scrawny male scientist on his knees a few feet away from her. He was grinning like they weren't trapped in a heavily guarded room, probably about to be deported to Earth and put on trial.

"You're Maria Robotnik, aren't you?" Maria only nodded in response, and the scientist beamed even harder, shuffling closer.

She recognized him as he drew nearer. Theo Bright, the resident genius on the ship. His family's vast intelligence, rivalling that of the Robotnik line, and his natural aptitude at mechanical engineering and design put him at the head of the entire war-based division on the ARK.

The man could build a working computer or rig an explosive from nothing but scraps, so being in charge of the construction of munitions was just his forte. But Theo was known to be more than a bit eccentric.

Gerald had snatched him up from Earth the moment he turned eighteen nonetheless. The Professor saw Theo's eccentricity as an asset. Plus, Theo had already graduated from college just that year, having entered at only fourteen.

Maria snapped back into reality when she realized Theo was rambling in whispers about something or another. "... connection with Experiment 56. Could you tell me about him? Is he a fully organic individual or is there any trace of robotic skeleton or other mechanical parts inside him?"

"Um." Maria had missed about ninety percent of that. "I don't think so."

"What a shame! A metal skeleton could truly enhance his features!" Theo shook away the pale brown strands that had fallen into his face, revealing grey eyes twinkling with excitement.

"Actually," Maria said, forgetting her surroundings for a moment, "his bones can take 8000 Newtons of force before even beginning to crack."

Theo's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "8000 Newtons! That's twice the amount it takes to fracture a human bone!"

"Would you two shut up?" the woman sitting beside Maria cut in. Her lab coat was perfectly pressed, spotless except for a few splatters of blood, and cracks ran down her glasses. She didn't seem to notice.

"Not all of us have to be pessimists like you, Penny," Theo retorted, the grin on his face not faltering. "We're just making the best of the situation!"

"That's Dr. Pahlke," the woman said flatly, "and what is there to make the best of? Do you think they've rounded up persons of interest to hold a tea party?"

Theo's expression fell, but he laughed softly nonetheless. "It's all a simple misunderstanding, my girl. It is unfortunate that studies will be stopping, but with due process, we'll all soon be back on Earth!"

"How can a genius be so naive?" Penny asked, brown eyes flashing in anger. "We're going to be executed! We know too much about that experiment! I should never have assisted in its creation."

Her gaze turned to Maria, hysteria in her face. "Is it true? That you've been escaping with the experiment?"

The girl hesitated, but she nodded. There was no point in lying now.

"If that creature escapes..." Dr. Pahlke bowed her head, shiny black strands of hair falling into her face. Her hands shook as they curled into fists. "We're all doomed. They'd rather kill us than let any word leave this place."

Maria was struck by the despair of these people. She looked around and saw that everyone else sat in similar positions, slumped over as if hopelessness was bearing down on them. Some sobbed, while everyone else remained impassive, resigned. Only Theo's eyes were still bright.

As she'd been selfishly trying to flee from this place, Maria hadn't once thought of the people she was leaving behind. Even after Mrs. Tower had been murdered before her eyes, she'd never considered that this brutality would affect everyone on the ship. Never thought it'd finally reach her.

"Shadow's going to help us," Maria said weakly, her confidence wavering. So much time had passed, and still, he hadn't appeared.

"Is that what you're calling him?" Dr. Pahlke asked dryly. She shook her head. "The experiment... They act like we don't know what he did to that guard. Everyone knows. So why should I trust a killer? Why would you?"

Maria clenched her bound hands. "He didn't want to do it. Grandfather made him."

Dr. Pahlke looked at her in surprise. All the guards knew that Rei had loved this girl like a little sister, and that, along with news of the true cause of his demise, had been passed up as well. Maria wouldn't lie about someone that must have been family to her. "Even so," she said slowly. "I can't place my hope in a person I've never met."

"If you won't do that," Theo interjected, voice somber, "then what will you hope for?"

Dr. Pahlke didn't answer.

Maria stared at the ground for a moment before speaking up. "The past forty-eight hours, I've seen a lot of horrible things. I saw my friend's mother killed in front of him. I saw the soldiers hurting

civilians. And I even saw it happen to me, when I thought I could never be hurt or killed."

Weakly, Maria shrugged. Scrapes and bruises ran down her exposed arms, and blood still stained blonde hair where the gun had clocked her. "Yet here I am."

Theo and Dr. Pahlke were both staring mutely at her, so she took a breath and continued. "But I also saw one of those soldiers stand up for me when he could easily have said nothing. I saw my grandfather sacrifice his freedom so I would have the chance to escape. And I saw that someone who I thought was cruel and evil was beginning to turn into a better person."

She looked up finally. "So I have to believe that Shadow will help us, even if it seems like he's abandoned me. Because if I never trust anyone, and if I stop believing that there can be good in any person, then I might as well just give up right now!"

The two looked at her for a long time. Finally, it was Dr. Pahlke who spoke. "Maybe you're right. There's nothing to be done now, so the only thing any of us can do is hope for the best. As unlikely as that may be," she added under her breath.

Maria smiled in gratitude, ignoring the doctor's comment. She couldn't do much in her current situation, but if she could share her hope with just one person, that was enough for her.

But as time went on, hours or minutes passed, even her faith began to dwindle. She'd begun counting to sixty, simultaneously trying to keep tally, and she lost track around a hundred and seven. But with every minute that passed by, her anxiety only grew.

Where is he?

Scenarios whipped through her mind: Shadow never hearing her scream and continuing on oblivious, or having charged in only to be

killed or captured, and the one that she refused to think about: Shadow leaving her behind.

But he had changed. Hadn't he? It'd only been two days since that initial terror-stricken reaction, when she had hid from him and cried - certain she was going to die. And already she'd begun to view him more fondly, an old friend. He wasn't the same. He would never be the same again. But the bits and pieces of him that mattered had come back.

Shadow wouldn't leave her. She was certain.

And he was too strong, too alert, to have been captured, or to have not heard her. Right? Maybe he was just waiting for an opportune moment. That, she thought, was something he would have done. He was much too level-headed to charge in with no regard for either of their safety. When cornered or pressured, Shadow could be reckless, but he wasn't either of those things right now.

Calm swept over her again. He would come, surely. She just had to wait a little bit longer.

Everyone was startled by the sound of slamming and yelling coming from outside the door. " - *can't do this!*" Within a moment, the scuffle ceased and only the faint murmur of voices filtered through the thick slab of metal.

Maria looked back at her friends, who gazed at her with identical wide-eyed stares. Tentatively, she began to shuffle forward on her knees.

"What are you doing?!" Dr. Pahlke hissed, grabbing at the hem of Maria's jacket. "You'll be killed!"

The girl pulled away, continuing her slow journey. "I have to know."

"No!" Theo tried in vain to grab at her without toppling forward, but she ignored him.

When Maria reached the front of the room, she pressed her ear against the door and strained to hear through the thick metal. Words cut in and out, but she managed to pick up on the conversation.

"What... supposed to do?" The faint voices barely reached her. Most were unfamiliar.

"... thing got hold of a gun somehow! Half of... section... dead!"

Shadow, Maria thought, heart pounding.

"... Commander says to execute them. All of them."

"The kid?"

"Her too." Maria's eyes widened. "So now... decide who... ?"

"Shit, man, don't look at me.... little girl back home."

"It can't just be one of us!... chaos as soon as... first shot!... have to... all at once."

"Look, all I know... thing was making a beeline this way... Commander made himself clear. Nobody gets out with information on the experiment."

Maria didn't wait to hear the rest. She shuffled back towards Theo and Dr. Pahlke as fast as she could with her legs bound. The other people ignored her or looked up with dead eyes as she scrambled past. They already knew the end was coming.

"They're going to execute us all," Maria choked, gasping for breath.

The doctor's face went white, and her stony expression returned. "Then there is no hope after all." Even Theo looked grim now.

Maria frantically went over every idea she could think of, but she had nothing. The room was all but empty, without any tools or anything she could use; there was no way out except the single door.

Shadow, please come, she begged silently. He was her only chance now. If he didn't come for her soon, then...

Maria's went still as she realized the truth. Shadow would never save her in time. If she just sat here quivering like a frightened puppy, she would be executed, the guards and scientists along with her.

All this time... her whole life, she had relied on others. She'd relied on her father for love, until his heart gave out. She'd relied on her grandfather for life, until he ran out of time. And she'd relied on Shadow for safety, until he couldn't protect her anymore.

If you're ever on your own... you can't always run away.

You have to live, Maria... You have to live.

The old words empowered her, and her hands tightened into a fist in the cuffs. Maria Robotnik was not going to die today. She was tired of having to be supported by others, never able to carry herself. Her time was up, and she could either wait to be saved by someone who may only come too late, or, for the first time, she could save herself.

She was weak. She was small. But she would live, because she had something nobody else had: a sort of inner strength, buried so deep inside that few could have guessed at what she was hiding. But now that power was waking up, burning bright inside, lighting her up from within.

And Maria was nothing if not persistent.

She looked around her, suddenly deadly calm. There *had* to be some sort of asset in this room... Something that could allow her to escape... There were crates in the back, but those would surely be checked. That would only buy some time. There may be supplies, but she had no way to pry the lids open.

First things first, she had to get these restraints off. There were at least thirty people in here, maybe more... If they weren't handcuffed,

and if she could get them to team up, they might have a fighting chance until Shadow arrived. He was on the way! She knew that, at least. All she had to do was delay them long enough.

An idea striking her, she dug through her pockets. Maria had always been in the habit of hoarding small objects. This dress was old, still fitting despite her having worn it since she was a little kid. She'd found her old pocket light in it already. Surely...

She gasped as her fingers closed around something hard, and she pulled it out slowly, almost reverently.

The keycard.

Her shaking hands clasped tight around the red piece of plastic. This simple object, the thing that had violently ended her friendship with Shadow, would save her life today.

"What is that?" Dr. Pahlke asked, finally noticing the keycard she was holding. Theo had been watching all this time, eyes narrowed.

Maria wasted no time in jamming it into the teeth of the handcuffs. Theo smiled approvingly. "A shim. Now why didn't I think of that? I must say, Ms. Robotnik, you are nearly as clever as I am."

"A what?" Dr. Pahlke asked as Maria fiddled with her cuffs.

"You see, you simply stick a long, thin object into the teeth of a handcuff, and - " Maria gasped as her restraints popped open and clattered to the floor, interrupting Theo. "And, that."

Maria set to work on the cuffs locked around her ankles, exhilaration flooding her. She had done it. As soon as she was free, she rushed over to Theo, who was cuffed behind his back. Maria was so elated by her success that she didn't notice the voices outside the door beginning to rise.

When the door opened and screaming soldiers poured through it, she jumped so violently that the flimsy plastic snapped at the corner. The men stormed into the room which quickly erupted into chaos as people began screaming and trying to crawl away.

Hidden behind Theo's frame, as small as it was, the soldiers didn't see Maria as she desperately pulled out the chunk of plastic and continued working at the handcuffs.

"Maria, there's no time," Theo said, his eyes straight ahead. Near the back, they were safe, but only for a moment. "Please hide yourself before the soldiers take you as well."

Maria wiped her damp eyes, trying in vain to release the handcuffs, though she knew it was hopeless. By the time she got off the ones on his ankles, they'd be noticed. "I won't leave you!"

"Maria." Dr. Pahlke's face was no longer terrified and pale. She too gazed straight ahead, speaking without tremor. "Leave and tell the world of the horrors that have happened in this place. Carry our memories with you until the day you die. For the sake of everyone on the ARK, do not let our deaths be in vain."

Maria stared at her for several seconds, not feeling the tears of shame pricking at her eyes. And then she scrambled back, rushing for the safety behind the crates. She could buy herself the minutes she needed, but at what cost?

When she peered out a minute later, she had to cover her mouth to keep from throwing up at the sight of the carnage. Dozens of guards and scientists lay dead, mixed blood pooling around their blank faces. The soldiers stormed about, stepping recklessly over bullet-filled bodies as they shot anyone who moved. Owens, she was relieved to see, was not among the executors.

But that relief was short lived. Guards thundered over to Dr. Pahlke and Theo, wasting no time in putting a bullet into their heads. For Theo, it was easy and quick. He sank down as the bullet pierced his

brain, life leaving him immediately. Efficient, and clean, and somehow unsuitable for the erratic scientist.

The doctor was not so lucky. She was blasted back by the shot, her body twisting to land facing Maria. Black hair matted with blood fell wildly over her eyes as her tiny struggles ceased. The girl sunk back into the shadows, barely able to contain her cry of horror as the soldiers left her body there. Like a piece of discarded garbage.

Dr. Pahlke's eyes bored into her, gaze softening as life began to leave it. Her lips moved slightly as she mouthed something.

Thank you.

And with one last, long shudder, her eyes glazed over as life left her.

Maria sank down, sobbing silently as destruction surrounded her. Innocent after innocent person was executed before her eyes, and she couldn't tear her gaze away as their bodies piled up and eventually stopped twitching. Even when she closed her eyes, the image was burned into her mind.

All seven of the soldiers who had entered the room began the final scramble for the last surviving prisoner. They raised their guns and shot, peppering the man with bullets until he sank to the ground and went still. For just a moment, it was quiet.

That's when the world exploded.

Maria had to duck as the metal door slammed into the wall above her, denting it and hitting the ground with a crash. *He would have been too late*, she thought, a strange, almost-calm filling her. *He would have found my corpse among them.*

"Where is she?! What did you do to her?!"

Maria gathered enough courage to peer around the boxes once more. Shadow was there, his ruby eyes burning with a fury she'd

never seen in them. His grip on chaos was comparatively weak without a single emerald, but in the face of his rage, it seemed the most powerful force in the world.

Merciless, Shadow blasted them with torrents of energy. One man was impaled by a spear of blood red chaos, another hit square in the chest with a crackling green ball. Explosions erupted around the room, sending soldiers and corpses alike flying.

It was more power than he'd ever need to kill these men, but he didn't care. The chaos fed off his rage, elevating him to levels he'd never experienced before. It would have been intoxicating if not for the bitter wrath.

Soon they were all dead, or would be soon. He grabbed the last crippled soldier. The man moaned, head lolling back. "Did you kill her?!" Shadow snarled. When the soldier didn't answer he slammed him back into the ground, shattering his spinal cord and killing him instantly.

The hedgehog stood slowly, eyes darting about the corpse-strewn room for a small body, a scrap of blue fabric, a flash of bloodied golden hair.

"Maria..." His voice cracked, and he screamed, brimming with hysteria. "MARIA!"

Finally, she found the strength to stand. She was shaking so badly that she could hardly stay on her feet, but she managed to take a few wavering steps forward. "Shadow..." The voice that escaped her was broken, not her own.

He spun around and was immediately upon her, pulling her into a tight embrace. She fell to her knees, arms hanging limply by her side. Had her mind not been so slow to register, she would have been shocked by this display of emotion. Shadow would've been surprised at this himself, if not for the terror consuming him.

Shadow hadn't realized, until he saw the blood pooling from under the door and heard the screams within, how much losing Maria terrified him. Of course he'd known it already, but that horrible, suffocating horror finally proved to him that the girl had earned a place in his heart.

He could not say why he found himself so pulled to her, like a planet orbiting a star. And he couldn't say why he had broken away from his old callous, selfish person because of this one girl. But it didn't matter. He was, irrevocably, changed. And Maria was alive. *That's* what mattered.

Shadow pulled away, letting her go. His red eyes darted over her as he examined her. Her wrists were chafed a raw red and he could see a dark, bloody bruise hidden in her hair, along with some other scrapes and marks on her. But, otherwise, she was okay.

"Did they hurt you?" Shadow asked. She was acting strange, eyes glazed over as if trapped in a fog. They must have done *something* to her.

Maria minutely shook her head. Shadow looked around, suddenly realizing the atmosphere. He might have been immune to the ghastly scenery, but sensitive Maria would not be.

"Let's get out of here." Maria didn't protest as Shadow pulled her to her feet and led her away. She stared at his gloved hand, tuning out the bodies around them. She could tell it was warm, and yet, she felt so very cold.

Even once they had long left that graveyard behind, whenever Maria looked up, she still saw a thousand corpses piled in front of her. But she couldn't muster up enough strength to even recoil. All she could do was step over the bodies.

It might have been minutes or hours later when Maria became aware that Shadow was talking. "... almost to the next floor down. We'll find somewhere safe and stop there." He looked at her, his business-like

tone shifting to one of concern. "I don't think you can go on much longer."

Maria would have protested, but even if she could scrape up enough energy to speak, he wasn't wrong. So she didn't.

The walk to the stairwell, and the dark trip down it, was eerily noiseless. Shadow must have taken out all the soldiers on that side of the floor. Maria thought she should feel safe at the lack of G.U.N. presence, but the silence was as empty as the eyes of her friends.

The stairwell spit them out into a dimly lit corridor, lined with crates and other containers ready for shipping. They had reached the cargo floor, the second-to-last stop on their journey.

It didn't take long for them to find a suitable place to stay. It was a janitor's closet, remarkably like Maria's old hiding spot, though it lacked the comfortable cushions and boxes. Maria immediately collapsed on the ground below the wide window, stuffing herself into the corner, and pulled her legs up to her chest.

Shadow sat down in the other corner, smart enough to give the girl some distance. For several minutes, they didn't speak.

When Shadow finally decided to say something, Maria jumped at the sudden sound. "What happened back there?"

The girl sank deeper into her skirt. "You saw what happened."

"I didn't see what happened to you," Shadow retorted, unable to keep the edge out of his voice. He tried to soften it. "I'm just afraid that they hurt you."

"It isn't me who got hurt." Maria's hand closed into a tiny fist. "They're all dead now, when I could have saved them."

Shadow's gaze snapped up. "How could you say that?! None of that was your fault!"

Maria blinked, snapped back into reality, but her voice dropped again. "I know you don't remember Rei. But he told me once, that even if it meant throwing away my humanity, I had to survive no matter what." She looked down. "I guess he was right. I could have saved them... I could have *tried*. "

Was there anything more she could have done? Maybe, maybe not, not without being killed herself. But she had used their deaths to buy time. Why did she deserve that over Theo, or Dr. Pahlke, or any of the dozens of people who had just died?

"You lived." Shadow said somberly. He didn't know that he was echoing Rei's words, but this wasn't lost on Maria. "That's what matters: you're alive and they aren't."

The girl looked up at him. "Can I ask you something?"

Shadow was taken slightly off-guard by the change of subject. "What is it?"

"Why do you care if I live or not?" She leaned closer unconsciously. "To be honest, it didn't seem like you liked me at all until a little while ago."

Shadow wasn't quite sure how to answer. Climbing to his feet, he stared out the window into the endless black. From this side of the ship, Earth wasn't visible. Just the vast reaches of space, peppered with stars. A dream; out of reach, out of sight.

"I can't explain it." He stared at Maria, who had risen to join him, one hand pressed against the cool glass as she watched the familiar void. "I just feel like I have to help you. No matter what, I have to keep you safe."

"Grandfather's brainwashing," Maria said softly. "You don't really feel that way."

Shadow shook his head vehemently. "It wasn't like that when I first met you. Then, I *needed* to help you. I didn't have a choice. Now..." He paused. "I *want* to."

Maria looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. She thought the old Shadow, once her best friend, would always be lost to her. But he was still here. He had always been here.

And they had, finally, fixed their broken friendship. Shadow wasn't just here because he had to be anymore. He'd chosen her in spite of that. And even when she'd been scared, even when that fear had turned to uncertainty, she had stayed too. Looking inside herself, she found that, somewhere along the way, those old feelings had gone.

They settled back down on the cold metal floor, closer together now. Maria would have been content to sit quietly with him until she drifted off to sleep, but Shadow broke the silence. "It's Rei, isn't it? He has something to do with why you were so afraid of me."

Maria stiffened at his name before she could stop herself, and Shadow knew he'd hit the mark. Quickly, he continued, stumbling over the words, "I have to know about my past. No matter how bad it is, I need to know what I did to you. So I don't do it again."

The girl was quiet for so long that Shadow thought she would refuse. But, finally, she spoke. "I didn't want you to remember. I was scared of what you'd do. But you deserve to know." She looked at him, meeting his eyes. "I trust you now."

Shadow listened intently as she recounted every last excruciating detail, beginning to end. That first glimpse of him, in the tank. Their nights spent together with Rei, the friendship that developed between the trio. All the way to the terrible end. And the long, lonely years that came after.

By the end, Maria didn't bother to wipe the tears off her face. It was the first time she had acknowledged their past out loud. "I promised

myself that I would never forgive you," she said quietly. "But I should have been asking for your forgiveness instead."

Maria took Shadow's hands in hers, refusing to look away. "Please, Shadow," she begged. "Please forgive me for leaving you alone. You needed me, and I wouldn't even talk to you. But I promise... I promise that I'll never leave you again!" She bowed her head, finally allowing herself to shamelessly cry.

Shadow stared at her. He'd been quiet this whole time, shocked by what she'd been telling him. But finally, he broke the speechlessness. "Maria, you don't need to be sorry after what I did," he said quietly.

It wasn't easy, being told that *this* was what filled the blanks in his memory. A twisted tale of good and bad intentions, imperfect people who had all made mistakes. Mistakes that had gotten a friend killed. And Shadow was right at the center of it.

Maria let go of him and wiped away her tears. Shadow continued, "But if you'll forgive me for killing Rei, then I will."

Faintly, Maria managed to smile. "I do. I think I did a long time ago." Closing her eyes, she sat back against the wall. She felt so much lighter now. "When we make it to Earth, let's start over. That's what Rei would have wanted, for us to keep being friends, even after everything that happened."

Earth. Shadow hadn't thought of that. Right now, he had one directive: Keep Maria safe and alive. And by now, he had decided without a doubt to stay with her once they escaped. But when they had the freedom of Earth, what would he do then?

"What is my purpose?" Shadow asked aloud, his voice a murmur. "Sometimes I wonder why I was ever made at all."

Maria tipped her head back, staring at the bare ceiling. She was loaded down with purposes. She counted off each one: Rei's face,

darkened by the doorway as he stared back at her, telling her to live. Shadow, Grandfather's messenger, ordering her to escape. And Dr. Pahlke's dying request, begging her to speak.

"You were created as a weapon, and as a cure. But that's not all you are," Maria said. She closed her eyes, sleep drawing her in. "That's why they made you. But that's not why you should live. It's up to you to find your purpose for living, Shadow..."

Maria fought off sleep for just a little longer, remembering something her grandfather had once said. He'd tell her all the old tales and sayings, stories his parents had once told him. "Grandfather called it 'ikigai'. That's something inside every one of us, something we all have to find: our reason to be... To live, and be happy..."

And she was gone, lost to the world of dreams.

Ikigai. The word he identified as Sajipean sounded strange in Shadow's head, but somehow fitting. He liked it. It took such a complex concept, your reason to continue on, and made it into a single word.

Shadow decided then. He didn't need anything else; without Maria, everything that mattered to him would cease to exist. He could not imagine going back to the old days, the time when he simply lived from day to day, never hoping for something more.

Maria was his sole purpose, the only reason he continued to live. She was his *ikigai*. Her dreams would become his dreams. Her wishes would be his wishes too. If she was happy, that was all he would ever need. So he slept, dreaming of a future where they could finally be safe.

Walls

Little by little, the memories are seeping back into me. A snatch of a moment, a trace of a dream, a puzzle that's finally falling into place.

Maria was the first thing I saw when I came into this world.

I remember her now. She pressed against the glass, trying to reach me, until I believed that she could pull down all the walls with her. Even back then, I could see it. She was not meant for walls and rooms and prisons. She was misplaced.

Maria and I are more similar than maybe even she realizes. We're both trapped here, being crushed by these walls, with no hope of escape for so long. And we wished and dreamed of shattering them, until the dream went cold.

I have to guide her to Earth. That was my purpose, from the beginning. To hell with the Professor. To hell with G.U.N. They tried to crush my will, but Maria wouldn't let them chain me. She saved me. She showed me what life could be like with the freedom to live.

I don't want to survive. I want to know what it's like to be alive.

I will take her to a place without walls.

We will live.

Gerald awoke with a jolt, his fingers digging into the chair. He hadn't been allowing himself to sleep, watching the cameras as closely as the Commander. But his constant worrying about Maria had finally pushed him past the limits of exhaustion.

He'd barely left this room in the past two days, and only eaten the scraps they threw at him, so his body was reaching his breaking

point. Plus, the man couldn't help but notice, his usually perfectly-pressed clothing was beginning to get quite distastefully wrinkled.

These past few days, he had seen too much. Only glimpses, before the cameras changed. But he saw women dragged through the halls by their hair, men slammed to the ground, people shot dead for anything and nothing.

It was a massacre. Anyone involved in Project Shadow would not live; the people left would wish they had not survived. It made him sick, to think of all these innocent people being killed without so much as a false trial.

But what could he do? How could he, one old man, a single person who had willingly saved Maria and doomed everyone else, fight every soldier? The army of the United Federation? The president himself?

He had killed them all. And if it gave Maria even the slightest sliver of a chance, he did not regret it.

But out of all the horrors he had seen on those screens, there was something he had not: Maria and Shadow.

He'd caught a glimpse of them running from the soldiers, huddling in the elevator. And he saw them escape and disappear to a place where cameras couldn't see them. But it had been nearly forty hours since then. There were flashes, glimpses just as the display changed. But perhaps that was his old brain playing with his hope.

The Commander looked back at him. "I see you are awake. Before you ask, no, there have been no sightings of your precious Maria. Unfortunately," he added under his breath. "I do hope you've realized how much trouble your experiment has caused."

Enraged, the Professor started up from his chair. "If you had not initiated this *attack* - "

The Commander's eyes hardened. "If someone had not let him out. Let us see... The body count is in the hundreds, if not thousands, thanks to that... mistake."

Gerald avoided the obvious accusation. "It's murder! You're massacring these innocent people!"

"Those who have plotted against the government of the United Federation are not innocent," the Commander said dismissively, turning back to the screen.

"These claims are fraudulent and you know it. Why are you doing this? What have we done to deserve this?"

The man glanced back, regarding Gerald. "You are not stupid, Professor. Of course, said claims will be for the press' benefit. But I didn't need to tell you that, did I?"

Gerald glared a hole into the back of his head as he continued. "You have gone too far, Gerald. Your 'Ultimate Lifeform' is, truly, perfection. What all bioengineers strive for. But it is *too* perfect."

The Commander stroked his chin, eyes still darting over the cameras. "I do not say that the claims I make against you are valid. Simply, this project is too dangerous. If even a single person escapes this place with knowledge of the experiment, the world may fall into ruin."

Suddenly, the man stood, meeting Gerald eye-to-eye. "You must take the fall in order to preserve humanity. I am not cruel, although you may think otherwise. I only have the best interests of the human race in mind."

The Professor did not flinch. "You have no right to decide who lives and who dies. You cannot look upon a group with no regard for the individuals. Think about people like *Maria*," he spat. "She waited her whole life to be cured, so she could finally have a chance to live her

life as a normal child. But you didn't think of *her* . You didn't think of any one of us."

At this, the Commander did not meet Gerald's gaze, turning away. "I can understand your position, Professor. But when it comes to matters of humanity, I cannot afford to consider the individual. If I stop to worry about a single person, then I may put millions more in danger. So I sympathize. I truly do. This is simply the way things must be."

Gerald flopped into his chair. "You are insane. A psychopath. There is no reasoning with you."

"Perhaps," the Commander said thoughtfully, as though the idea had never occurred to him. "A detachment from emotion... For this line of work, it is perfect. Yes, perhaps I am."

Before Gerald could respond, the Commander's radio blared to life. "Commander!" a static-filled voice exclaimed. "We've reached the Biolizard's containment. Orders?"

"Torch the door open and put the creature down," the Commander said simply, sitting down again.

Listening to this exchange, Gerald smirked knowingly. "Commander, have you read the reports on the Biolizard?"

"Extensively. Why?"

"By chance, have you read the essays on its behaviour?"

The Commander looked at him with one brow raised. "As a creature with little sign of higher intelligence, it is usually docile, but is prone to bursts of aggression."

"Yes," Gerald said, his smile widening. "But the Biolizard, though it can survive without sustenance for a period of centuries, has consistently shown over 500% increased aggression levels when

without food. And, as it is on a monthly feeding basis..." The Professor tapped his chin thoughtfully. "In fact, I believe we were meant to have fed it a few days ago..."

As if on cue, screams and static erupted through the crackling radio. "*Oh god... what... is it?! It's... rampage... Killed twenty men... Seal off the doors! Don't let it out! DON'T LET IT OUT!*" The transmission ended in a broken wail, followed by a roar that shook the entire ship and stumbled Gerald back into the chair, then crackles that finally cut out.

"Well, I don't believe we'll have to feed it this month," Gerald mused, and now it was the Commander gaping at him like he was insane.

The man stood and began to run for the door, but the Professor stopped him. "If you wish to live, or," he added bitterly, "if you wish for *humanity* to live, I do not suggest attempting to unseal those doors."

Defeated, the Commander stopped, unable to do anything but glare. And as he stood there, his back to the cameras, Gerald's eyes flicked over. Something instantly caught his eye.

They were there.

He was *sure* .

As Gerald started and the Commander whipped around to look at the cameras, the screen changed to an empty storage room. The Commander narrowed his eyes, slowly lowering himself into his chair, but said nothing.

But it wasn't the sight of Maria, with her frazzled hair and rumpled, blood-stained clothing that had gotten to him. It wasn't the wild look in Shadow's eyes, visible even through the tiny monitor screen. No, it was something worse than that.

The soldiers.

They had seen Maria and Shadow too.

Maria was the first to wake. She noticed, before she opened her eyes, that she was much more comfortable than she'd been in a long time.

She blinked, realizing that her cheek was buried in black fur, and straightened. She'd been leaning against Shadow as she slept, and while he was a bit rough around the edges, it was more comfortable support than the hard metal floor she'd slept on the night before.

Maria couldn't help the slight smile creeping up as she looked over at him. When he was awake, Shadow was always tense, on guard - restrained, down to each carefully controlled breath he took. And even in sleep one ear was still pricked. But this was the first time she had seen him relaxed in years.

Soon, she thought. Soon, they would be in a place where Shadow could be happy too.

Even after showing that she could save herself, she still felt kind of useless beside him. He was keeping her alive, and she'd gotten them in so much trouble. She wanted to help keep him safe, too. But what could she possibly do when he was the stronger one?

Shadow woke suddenly, blinking. And down it came, the veil of tension, as his red eyes found her in the dark. "How long have you been awake?"

"Just for a minute." She looked at him. "We're safe here."

"We're never safe," Shadow replied, and Maria knew he was right. "Do you feel alright?"

"Just a little bruised, that's all," Maria replied cheerfully. "I'm more worried about you, honestly. After..." Her face fell and she choked on

her words, remembering the bodies. The blood. Dr. Pahlke's dull eyes.

Shadow didn't push. "I'm fine. But the chaos takes a long time to come back to me fully, so we'll have to be careful. I don't have enough power to do that again."

Maria nodded mutely, her mind still locked on that event as she followed Shadow out. It was horrifying, of course it was. And yet...

The terror was fading.

She had witnessed a single person's death, and it had haunted her for five years. That still followed her. But she had just witnessed something ten times the scale, and had only a tenth of the reaction.

I'm becoming desensitized, she realized. The death... the blood... the raw fear... It was all normal now. This was life.

It still affected her; it always would. But these people were just another ghost to carry. She harboured so many now. Her parents. The doctor. Rei. Mrs. Tower. Theo. Dr. Pahlke. And the hundreds of people who had died on the ARK. Maria would be forever haunted, even once she was the only one left to remember them.

Maria glanced at Shadow. *He has ghosts too*, she thought.

At least she wasn't alone. They shared some of the demons.

Rei. Rei was on both of them. Shadow wasn't as strong as he thought he had been. And Maria had never been strong enough. But in truth, that wasn't their fault. It had been a mix of good intentions and bad circumstance that took him away. There was nothing to be done about it now.

If. If Rei had survived. If the doctor had never died. If they had remained friends all these years.

Would I really want that back? Maria wondered, involuntarily shuddering. Shadow, walking in front of her, didn't notice.

But then, what did it matter to her? The monster had already broken her. She smothered the dark part of her, the part that *it* injected into her. The side of her without hope, without feeling. But it was there; it was always lurking. So what did it matter if she was broken into even smaller pieces?

If she could have those days back... that time spent with Shadow and Rei... then she would gladly go back to the dark nights. She had been happy. Despite that, she had been happy.

But that isn't what Rei or Shadow would have wanted. They wouldn't have let her suffer in silence, if they had known. Rei hadn't.

If again.

Maria didn't have time for ifs right now. This was now, and she would have time to think about the past later. Not forever, she remembered, the reminder crushing her spirit. And it was true. She would escape, but only for so long.

I didn't take my pills, she thought. Once a day, every night. She had forgotten, and the instructions were to take one as soon as possible if she didn't remember. Quickly, she pulled the container out of her pocket and choked down the large capsule.

Hearing the bottle rattling, Shadow glanced back. "What is that?"

Maria fumbled and shoved it back into her pocket, trying to look innocent. "Nothing."

"You don't have to hide food. Just eat it, don't worry about me." Maria relaxed at that comment. He hadn't seen what she'd been swallowing.

"I'm not," she said indignantly. "I only found a bag of dried stuff before anyway."

"What happened to it?"

Sheepishly, Maria admitted, "I ate it."

Shadow laughed, and a surprised Maria beamed. Was that the first time he had genuinely laughed since they'd started on this long journey? They were so close to freedom... and already, things were beginning to get easier between them.

Right now, life was difficult. After everything Maria had seen, this ship was beginning to unnerve her. Her childhood home was gone. It had gone with Rei and Shadow; it had gone with her hope.

But, finally, she had that hope again. They would go to Earth. They would be happy. And, for Rei, she would thrive in every single moment of it.

"Whose idea was it to design the ship this way?" Shadow muttered a few minutes later. "Why do the stairs only go one floor at a time, like a corkscrew? Why can't they just go straight down?"

"Normally," Maria replied, "we use the elevators. The stairs are a formality, so they made them for design, not purpose. So they could pack in more rooms or something like that."

Shadow, dissatisfied with this illogical explanation, sighed. "If we move quickly, we should be able to reach the other side of the floor in a few hours. And then... Where are the escape pods?"

"The middle. In the hangar."

"Of course," Shadow grumbled. "We'll be here another day."

Maria's heart sank. Another day? With every one that passed, their chances went down. She didn't want to be so close, only to get

trapped on this ship. Knowing G.U.N., they would launch all the escape pods before they left, stranding anyone left behind up here.

They wouldn't yet, just in case - ship failure, disaster, anything could happen. G.U.N. wasn't stupid. But if they waited too long...

Shadow noticed the anxiety on Maria's face. "They're not leaving until they catch us," he reassured. "Or they have reason to believe that we're not here."

"An alert goes off whenever an escape pod is launched," Maria said thoughtfully. So he was right. They were safe.

"Can they turn the escape pods off?"

"No. It's not even coded into the system." The girl hesitated and said slowly, "Well - yes, they can require a manual launch. If a fugitive or something is loose on the ship, he'd have to have someone else pull the lever from outside the escape pod."

Concerned, the hedgehog looked back as she paused and thought about this. "But Grandfather and the pilots would never give up the lockdown code, and nobody else knows it. So they'd have to hack the ARK to get it, which would take..." Her eyes widened, realizing how much time had passed already. "Days."

Shadow grabbed her hand, pulling her forward. "We have to hurry - but we can't rush this. Soldiers will be swarming the bottom floor during the day, so we have to travel when it's dark. But if we're fast, we can be there first thing tomorrow." He looked at her, stumbling along beside him. "Can you wait one more day?"

Maria hesitated, then nodded. He was counting on her to be brave. She had waited twelve years, so she could wait one day.

Just one day.

Hours passed. They slinked through the ship, going as fast as they could while hiding from the sparse nightly patrols. Maria missed the bright gold-tinted lights of simulated day, but that was probably why she and Shadow had had so many close calls before. The dark lights would help keep them hidden now.

It must have been the early hours of morning when they reached a large room, windows looking into it, with no other hallway to turn to. Shadow pushed Maria to the ground and they crawled under the windows.

Hesitantly, the hedgehog sat up and peered into the room. Maria's curiosity got the best of her and she looked in as well. The brightly-lit room illuminated the darkness behind them, but there was nothing in there but rows and rows of crates, stacked to the ceiling.

That, and, visible on the other side of a wall of boxes stacked against the glass, a small encampment of six soldiers. They had bedrolls spread on the floor, so it was clear they had no intention of leaving. Beyond them lay the opposite door, and the stairwell beyond it.

Maria and Shadow ducked down again. "Is there a way around?" Shadow whispered.

The girl shrugged helplessly. She'd gone below the residential floors maybe once in her life. "It'd take an hour just to find a hallway that leads around it."

Maria looked up at the bulbs. They were beginning to emit the greenish hue that signalled the transition to the bright yellow-white lights of day. "It's almost morning. We're running out of time."

Shadow peeked in one last time and nodded. "We'll go in. Try to sneak by them. If we can't, or if we get caught..." The dusky hedgehog narrowed his eyes. "You run. You don't look back. And you hide until I come for you. If the next night comes, then you go to the escape pods and you get out."

"I'm not leaving you." Maria's tone was just as resolute.

"And I'm not losing you." Even Maria's resolve wilted under Shadow's severe look. "My goal is for you to escape. Not me. Not both of us. *You.*"

Maria faltered. "I won't let you..."

"You don't have a choice. I'm not moving until you promise me that you'll run." Shadow crossed his arms and glared at the ceiling.

Maria sighed and said a silent apology to Rei, because whether Shadow knew it or not, he had surely picked up this stubbornness from her. This was a tactic she had deployed on the guard often.

"I promise," she mumbled, taking advantage of Shadow's lack of a proper childhood and crossing her fingers. If he noticed, he wouldn't know what that meant.

The door opened silently at their approach. Maria held her breath as it whirled to a close behind her, but the soldiers hadn't heard. Now inside the soundproof room, she could hear their raucous chatter, though they were yards away.

Like a maze stretched piles of gigantic crates before them, stacked to the vaulted ceiling. In the corner, a forklift and other machinery sat abandoned. She and Shadow spotted the gap at the other end of the massive room. The hedgehog crouched down, motioning for Maria to do the same, and dashed past the opening leading right to the soldiers. Taking a breath, the terrified girl followed.

Nothing, no cries or gunshots as she crossed. The laughter continued. Her shoes were soft and Shadow weighed practically nothing, so they were soundless, and they must have all been turned away. But it would not be so easy. This didn't lead to the door, so they would have to cross again.

Maria's chest constricted and she had to hold her breath every time they rushed into the safety of the next tower of crates. But the soldiers weren't seeing them, too engrossed in their conversations.

It's too easy, Maria thought as they ran. *It's never easy*.

And yet, they made it to the door.

Shadow peered around the crates. The door was only a short dash across the room, and this was as close as they could get, but there was no possible way they could make it without alerting the soldiers. It was nothing but open space between the exit and them.

He pulled Maria down to his level and whispered, "We're going to have to run. You go first. I'll stand behind you so if they start shooting, I'll be the one taking it."

Maria knew she couldn't protest right now, but Shadow shook his head upon seeing her stubborn expression. "One bullet could kill you. I can take a hundred and get out alive."

Shadow, Maria was beginning to realize, was very hard to argue with.

Defeated, she nodded and crouched down to prepare herself. Just one dash for freedom, and they'd be safe. They were near the stairs. They'd lose the soldiers down there.

She was about to run forward when she felt Shadow tense behind her. Maria looked back and saw that his eyes were wide, pupils dilated so that they were nearly black, and both ears pricked as if listening to something only he could hear.

And then a roar erupted through the entire ARK, so loud that the ground shook like an earthquake and Maria was forced to cover her ears. She looked up slowly, her ears ringing, dimly aware of the sight of crates falling down towards her.

And then Shadow grabbed her and she stumbled back onto him, the boxes narrowly missing her as they crashed to the ground and splintered into pieces. Maria crawled off Shadow and he scrambled to his feet, dropping into a fighting stance.

She followed his gaze, though she knew what would be at the end of it. The six G.U.N. soldiers were standing motionless on the other side of where the wall of crates had been. They were frozen in shock, both from the ear-splitting sound, and the two most valuable fugitives in all of the U.F.'s history being delivered to them on a silver platter.

The stillness broke and everyone rushed into action. Shadow left Maria, taking the opportunity to charge the soldiers while the men made a mad scramble for their guns. By the time they were armed, Shadow had already headbutted one of them, sending him flying and knocking him unconscious.

Five.

Maria stood there for a few moments, unsure how to help. She ran after him, but of course she couldn't join the fray. What could she do? So she skidded to a stop and watched from a safe distance. In that time, another one had fallen, groaning in pain as he rolled around on the floor.

Four.

Shadow couldn't rely on sheer physical prowess anymore. The soldiers were firing openly on him now as he moved deftly about the makeshift arena. Summoning what little of his chaos energy was left, he propelled himself forward, sending men flying. The impact to the ground took them out of the fight, unconscious or broken.

Three.

Two.

He tackled the smaller of the soldiers as the more beefy man stopped to reload. Pinning the scrawny man to the ground with one hand, he took a few seconds to charge a chaos ball, struggling to muster that last bit of energy, and slammed it into his chest. The soldier convulsed then went limp.

One.

Shadow stood and turned to face the final opponent, and an intense pain ripped through his arm as a bullet barely missed him. Maria screamed and ran for him, and Shadow made the mistake of looking at her.

The final muscled soldier tackled him, terror and wrath in his eyes. Shadow cried out as his head slammed into the ground, and the man pointed his pistol at the hedgehog's head. Before he could fire, Shadow snapped out of it and slapped the gun out of the man's hands. It went off in the air and skidded to the ground near the wide-eyed Maria.

Shadow... she thought, clutching shaking hands to her chest.
Shadow can't lose. Shadow never loses...

And yet the soldier was on top of him, pinning him down. Weakened both from lack of chaos and the toll it had taken as it borrowed energy from his body, he was unable to muster the strength to shove the much heavier man off.

Still struggling with Shadow, the soldier managed to unsheathe a jagged, mean-looking knife from his belt. He immediately went for the face, but the Faunas pulled away at the last second. Blood trickled out of the slash on his cheek as he freed one arm and tried to push the weapon away.

But it was a losing battle. Every second, the knife inched closer and closer to his forehead. That was the only place that could kill Shadow in one strike. Too many injuries and he'd go down, though even his heart could heal from a few wounds. But a knife to the

brain, that was all it would take to erase Shadow the Hedgehog from this world.

Shadow's going to die.

"Maria! *Run!*" Shadow screamed, flinching out of the way as the knife dipped down hard, barely managing to push it back up in time.

Shadow's going to die.

Maria's eyes widened and she staggered backwards, but she couldn't tear herself away. She'd promised to run. She had. Shadow was going to lose this fight, and if she didn't leave, she would get swept away with him. Even so, she couldn't flee like a coward and leave him alone. But... what could she do? How could a little girl save anyone?

The gun was at her feet. She bent down and picked it up before she realized it, staring dimly at the weapon in her hand.

I can't take a life.

All those people who had died... Of course, none of it had been directly her fault. Maria had never hurt anyone - whatever she had or hadn't done, it was never her who pulled the trigger. If she became a killer... how could she possibly live with those ghosts?

But it was her inaction that had caused so many of their deaths.

Her hands dropped to her side, the pistol dangling limply from her fingers as she looked down at the ground. Around her, the world began to fade to grey. *I'm sorry, Shadow*, she thought, standing and bracing herself for the end, blue eyes dull as she stared blankly down.

Once Shadow was dead, she couldn't continue on. No, Maria would not escape without him. She... she couldn't be alone again. What

reason would there be to go to Earth when there was no one to share it with?

So she would stand here. She would look away from Shadow's corpse.

And she would embrace her execution, because finally, she could go to sleep and never wake up to a horrible, cruel world. This cold world that had taken everything away from her.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, twisting and turning around her like she was falling down the rabbit-hole. She couldn't even hear Shadow's struggles now. Was it already over?

She dared a glance upward, and her breath caught in her throat as she looked about in wonder. She wasn't in the cargo room. She wasn't even on the ARK.

She was in Eternity.

Light. There was so much light. Lights spilling out of the sky, the ground, the borderless walls, a world that illuminated itself into infinity. Shimmering gold orbs trailed out of crevices in the ground, disappearing into the sky. She was wrapped in that warm luminescence, but she felt embraced, not trapped.

Maybe I'm already dead, she thought, reaching out for one of those spheres of light. Her body was numb, her mind pleasantly empty.

And he was there, standing before her, but she wasn't afraid. It felt *right*. He was beautiful; that's what she thought as she gazed on in awe. The incandescence set his hair on fire, turning his eyes into green stars. He was a memory, lost in time. But he was almost real, too. Almost.

"Rei," Maria whispered. And before she could reach for him, he was there, pulling her in.

And she had changed so much in the past five years, but now she felt seven again, back in that time when she dreamed of living the rest of her life on Earth with Rei and Shadow. And it ripped open a gaping hole inside her that she thought had been filled: that yearning for Rei, the closest thing to a brother she'd ever had. But though it surfaced all those wounds again, it healed a part of her too.

He pulled away suddenly, and they both knew that they were out of time. "You have to save him," Rei said, as her vision flickered in and out of reality.

"I can't," Maria whispered, reaching out to grab him as he disappeared. "Rei, I can't!"

And he's gone. The light has faded, and he's left her alone in the dark.

But even then, back in reality, his voice reached her. *You can, Maria. Do you remember what I said? If you stand by and do nothing when someone needs you, it's almost like you killed them yourself.*

Maria couldn't speak, but she wanted to scream, to cry, and to give up.

I believe in you. Rei's voice, starting to go quiet, was firmer. *You're braver than you think. Don't you know that? You've never given up, no matter how badly you wanted to. Even when you just wanted it to end, you always kept trying! You always had hope! And you're not going to stand here and watch as they take Shadow away again!*

Maria's eyes widened and her hand tightened around the gun. Rei was right. She might have been delusional, but even if he wasn't real, he was right.

If she did nothing... If she sat there and watched, just like she always had... Shadow would die. And after losing all her other friends, her family... She wouldn't lose him too!

This world was cruel. It wanted to leave her with nothing, but for the first time, she could fight back. She could stop this.

Shadow was... struggling. Misguided. He hadn't always done the right thing, wasn't always a perfectly good person. But he wasn't bad, so why did they have to keep trying to kill him? Nobody deserved to die because they had been born. Wasn't that just what she had said? Everyone deserved a chance to live, to try to do better! She wouldn't let G.U.N. take that away from him!

Her eyes narrowed and she raised the gun with both hands. She was shaking violently, but there was hell in her eyes. And then Rei was there again, standing behind her, steadying her. Just like when he had trained her, telling her to live. She would, her *and* Shadow. Her trembling stilled and Rei let go, but he didn't leave, not yet.

The soldier glanced away from Shadow, and was shocked to see that formerly terrified girl pointing a gun straight at him. Wasn't that Maria Robotnik, the twelve-year-old with the fatal sickness? From what he'd heard, the girl was known to be weak and timid. In his final moments, he wondered how this kid, this little, harmless girl, could have the eyes of a wild animal.

Rei leaned down and whispered, "Don't forget... We can never regret this decision. If you pull that trigger, you have to mean it." And he was gone. Maria knew that this was it, he wasn't coming back.

Her eyes narrowed, the fire behind them burning ever brighter. Her rumpled hair fell into her face, making her look even more like an animal. And her fingers tightened on the gun, as both Shadow and the soldier stilled, deer caught in headlights.

I mean it, she thought.

And she pulled the trigger.

That day, Maria Robotnik took a life and saved one.

She ran. She didn't know where she was going, and she didn't care. She just dragged Shadow out from under the limp man's body and went.

Her eyes met the soldier's glassy gaze before she could stop herself. Cold, dead. The same as the doctor's eyes had been, vacant. They all looked the same.

I did that, she thought.

I did that.

Her feet pounded on the ground as Shadow ran silently beside her, just as in shock as she was. Through the halls. Down the stairs. And into the first room she saw.

Maria sank to her knees, gasping for breath. When she looked up, she found herself in an infirmary. Shadow pulled her to her feet and immediately Maria took charge.

"Go sit over there," she ordered, gesturing to a padded bench that sat underneath the large windows on the opposite end of the room.

Maria looked around, avoiding the advanced machinery, and finally found a first aid kit shoved into a drawer under the sink. Grabbing it, she ran over to Shadow. He looked mostly fine; the usual serious expression was on his face, though it seemed more troubled now, and he didn't seem to be dizzy or out of it.

But even in the unlit room Maria could see the dark blood trickling out of the graze wound on his arm, and she shuddered. "Give me your arm." She was squeamish, but it had to be done.

Shadow complied, but he said, "You don't have to take care of me."

Maria paused as she wiped gently at his arm with a moist cloth, untangling the blood-matted fur. She knew he wasn't just talking about medical care. But she ignored him and took out the black

bottle of hydrogen peroxide, dabbing it on a towel. "This is going to hurt."

Shadow blinked as she pressed it on, barely feeling the pain. "You shouldn't have to do this!" he snapped, anger seeping into his voice.

"You nearly died!" Maria cried shrilly, and they both stopped. The girl resumed, albeit more tensely, wrapping his arm in a bandage and setting to work on cleaning the less serious cut on his face. Her breaths came quickly as she dabbed at it, and her hands trembled.

Shadow's voice was softer this time. "You shouldn't have had to do that, and I should never have let that happen."

Maria faltered, but she continued cleaning the cut. "I did what I had to do."

"It's not right!" Shadow said, clearly upset.

The girl looked hard at him. "Nothing on this ship is *right* . It isn't right that I was meant to die before I was even born. It isn't right that I had to come here, thousands of miles away from Earth, just to have the smallest chance at living. It isn't right that Rei was executed for no reason."

Shadow flinched at that, but she continued relentlessly. "And it isn't right that there are people out there who want to take away my only friend left because of what he *can* do, rather than what he's *done* .

"The world is not a kind place." Maria stepped back, surveying her work, then stepped away to lean on the circular table in the middle of the room. "I know that now. So it's up to each of us to make it better for everyone. Even if it's in the smallest way... Even if you can only change one person's life... Then you've made it a little easier for the people who come after you."

She looked back at him, and Shadow was reminded of her burning eyes as she shot the soldier. "You're alive, Shadow. That soldier is

dead now, but his death meant that you lived. After all the horrible things that have happened, I decided not to stand for it anymore. I chose you. So I don't regret it."

Shadow wasn't sure what to say. He was just sorry, sorry that these experiences had molded her into someone harder. She was still that star-eyed little girl; she always would be. But a part of her had gone dark. He had never wanted her to become like him.

Maria's gaze was distant, somewhere far beyond this room, this ship. "Grandfather is gone, isn't he?"

Shadow started. He hadn't told her anything about him. "He told me that he would come for us once we make it to Earth, and he would cure you then."

Maria tilted her head. "Do you really think they'd let him go?"

Shadow turned away. He'd kept up that hope for her benefit. But she was right; after the execution of all the scientists, if Gerald Robotnik was kept alive, he would be in Federation custody forever.

"I'm never going to see Grandfather again," Maria said softly. "So getting to Earth doesn't even matter."

"What do you mean?! Of course it matters!" Shadow jumped to his feet, hands clenched. "Are you just going to give up your dream after everything we've been through?!"

Maria wasn't fazed by his anger. Calmly, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the capsule of pills. She took one out, swallowed it, and surveyed for a moment before tossing it at Shadow.

He caught it easily. "What is this?"

"I'm sick." Maria turned back to the table, eyes glazed over. "That's how long I have."

Shadow opened the bottle. It was large, but it only had a month or two's worth of pills, if that. He swallowed, suddenly feeling sick. "The Professor didn't tell me... He said you were sick, but I... I thought we had time."

The girl seemed so much smaller as she walked over the window, placing her hands on the cold glass. Earth was beautiful, even from so far away. She wondered if she'd ever get to see anything more than that, and for how long. "When those pills run out, nothing will be stopping NIDS from taking over my body. And then it's only a matter of time."

"We'll find more! I'll steal them if I have to!"

Maria looked at him, that crushing look in her icy eyes that froze him on the spot. "It won't be enough. Even with the pills..." She looked down. "Shadow... I'm out of time. There's no more experiments. There's no using your blood as a cure. I stole Grandfather's letters; he was making plans to withdraw from Project Shadow and return with me to Earth."

Staring at her, Shadow saw it clearly now. She was haggard, cheeks hollow, skin paled to near grey. He thought she had just been small, but that was the toll the sickness had taken on her development, stunting her to childlike proportions. And she was weak not because of that, but because the virus was eating her from the inside out.

The girl who he thought had been full of life, bursting with it, was dying.

He took a step back, defeated. "That can't be true..."

Maria turned back to the window. The hopelessness he thought had been smothered under all her optimism now shone clearly on her face. "I only have a few months to live."

Shadow was silent, in shock, for a long time. Everything he had worked for... everything he had dreamed of... it was all crumbling.

Had that been for nothing?

He'd known Maria was sick, but he thought she would be with him for years, at least, if not almost a full lifetime... But they only had a few more months together. Soon, too soon, she'd be gone. And he'd have the rest of eternity without her.

There would be nothing left in this world for him.

His hands tightened. "I don't care."

Surprised, Maria turned back to him. "What?"

"You're going to die." Shadow shut his eyes tightly and took a breath, steadying himself. "But that doesn't change anything. You deserve to have as much happiness as you possibly can. It's like you said... The world is cruel. But I want to make your life a little better."

Maria turned away from the window, her eyes beginning to water. "What about you? You can't... You'll be alone."

Shadow looked away. "I'll be okay. Knowing that I helped make the rest of your life the best it could be..." He looked up at her. "If I can do that, then I'll be okay."

Maria was still a moment, then suddenly, she was running to him, dropping to her knees and pulling him into a tight hug. "Thank you, Shadow," she said through her tears.

Shadow hugged her tightly, trying to memorize this moment, keep it in his mind forever. He meant what he'd said. If he could bring just a little bit of happiness to Maria... make her life just a tiny bit brighter... then he could go on without her. So he hung onto this point in time as hard as he could, memorizing every second.

Because Maria would only be here for a moment, and then she'd be gone.

Lost

Time. Isn't it beautiful? The way some memories catch and stay forever, glinting and glittering, and some drift away into the darkness...

Like me. I can feel it: every day I grow a little wearier, a little weaker. I'm drifting away. Soon, I'll only be a lost memory. But Shadow will remember me. He'll have forever to keep me, that one spot of sunlight in his dreams. A girl lost in time.

I... I don't want to die.

I've done my best to be brave, but that's the truth. I knew, I've always known, that it was inevitable. They've told me that for as long as I can remember. But it never truly struck me until now. Even reading those papers of Grandfather saying his final farewells, I still hoped. Hoped that Grandfather would find a cure, and that I would be saved.

But to be honest, I gave up that fantasy long ago. When I saw Rei's green eyes go dark, and the cold look on Shadow's face, I let the dreams of living slip away.

Earth. I always hoped for Earth. Just one breath of fresh air before I left this world, that's all I needed.

But it's not worth it. Shadow... we never should have met. Because now you'll be left, haunted, for an eternity. I can't even give you a year out of your endless life. Just a few short months.

I should have died a long time ago. I think I was meant to. And yet, I'm here. I'm still here. An anomaly, a mistake.

Grandfather would never have joined Project Shadow if it wasn't for me. So Shadow wouldn't be here. But maybe that would be better too.

It doesn't matter, I suppose. Shadow is alive, and, for now, I am too. I killed someone to preserve that fact, so I can't regret it. This is now, and there's no going back.

Shadow... Please, please be happy in the future. I know that you can find something on Earth to love. The world is merciless, that's true, but there's so many little good things in it too. So, even once I'm gone, please do your best to find something worth living for! For me, Shadow, you have to be happy. You will be.

I promise, someday, you will be.

Shadow woke from dreamless sleep, his hand immediately shooting out, searching. He found Maria's arm, rising and falling gently as she slept on the bench above him. The dark hedgehog closed his eyes and sighed with relief.

That paranoia, that she would slip away if he let his guard down, was one remnant of his past. It had kept him awake long after the girl had curled up on the bench and he'd made camp on the floor beside her.

Shadow sat up and looked at her, a rare smile tugging at his mouth. She was peaceful. When awake, Maria's face always contained the smallest, haunting trace of sadness. He wondered if she had been thinking the same thing when he awoke the night before. Did he look different when there were no fears boring through his mind?

The hedgehog stood and peered outside, from the darkened facility and into the blue outer rooms. The lights were dim, the halls silent. It was time.

When he turned, Maria was already sitting up. She looked at him silently, a question in her eyes, and Shadow nodded. She took a breath and stood, her hands shaking ever so slightly. Giving one last, meaningful glance at the Earth waiting for her, she and Shadow left.

It was here; it was almost here. What she had always wished for. And she was terrified.

Maria had so hated the ARK, but now, she felt almost reluctant to leave. Her fingertips drifted over the walls, the familiar cold seeping into them. She gazed out the windows, cherishing the feeling of being wrapped in a warm blanket of stars. On Earth, they would be out of reach. And she thought of the near-identical halls her and her friends had once run through.

She closed her eyes as she walked, letting the memories drift through her. Rei, lifting her onto his shoulders in one of the observatories, until she felt like she was flying through the stars. Teaching Shadow the constellations and little specks of planets, their breaths smudging the glass. And all three of them wandering the ARK, looking out nearly these same windows, laughing and talking about nothing.

Maria stopped, staring out at the planet far below. She wasn't ready to leave those memories behind, but she had no choice. There was nothing left for her here.

Shadow looked back and halted too. He tugged her arm, and in an attempt to alleviate the tension, said, "What do you want to do when we get to Earth?"

Maria let a dreamy smile cross her face. From now on, she had to look to the future. "I don't know yet. It's November, so if we set our trajectory for the United Federation, we might land somewhere with snow." She grinned. "The first thing I'll do is throw a snowball at you."

"A... snowball?"

Maria laughed at his blank expression. "You know about snow, right? It's soft, frozen water. And you pack it into a ball," she made the motions with her hand, "and throw it at people!"

Shadow blinked. "Why?"

"It's fun! You'll see." Maria giggled, and Shadow was relieved to see the old childishness coming back. She had been so quiet and serious, but now she looked like a little kid, strolling airily beside him.

"And then we can have hot chocolate - you'll love it, I swear - and sit around a fire, and walk through the city, and make snow angels..."

Maria rambled on for a long time, telling Shadow everything she wanted to do on Earth. The hedgehog was only half-listening, still keeping an ear out for danger, but he was happy to listen to her talk about her hopes.

"What about you?" Maria asked after being forced to take a breath. She tilted her head, listening raptly. "What do you want to do?"

Shadow glanced out the window at the blue planet below. "We'll do everything you said," he promised, "but I think I'll like it best when we're doing nothing at all."

He closed his eyes, imagining the landscapes the books Gerald had brought him conjured in his mind. A quiet forest blanketed in snow, no sounds but the soft whirling of wind and the trees rustling. He could imagine him and Maria there, nothing left to run from but time itself.

The young girl looked thoughtful. "Me too," she agreed. "We never really did anything when we were young, but even so, those were my best memories. So let's make sure we make time to do nothing."

Shadow allowed himself to smile. Of course it wouldn't be that simple. They were fugitives, so they would have to visit cities and towns only rarely, which meant they'd need to find an abandoned house. Maria would need warm clothing and food.

But he didn't have to worry about that now. And little did Shadow know that they wouldn't have to worry about it, ever. The two were almost out of time. They had only this snatch of happiness, this small window to hope for a future they could never have.

So, for a moment, he let himself dream.

The Commander stood thoughtfully between stacks of boxes, scanning the dates written on them. He had left Gerald in the observation room to come here, where tapes of the ARK's security system were stored. He intended to solve this, once and for all.

It didn't take long to find the tapes from the beginning of the invasion, just before they'd arrived. It was lucky. No one had been taking care of the systems, so there were no saved recordings from the last few days. Someone must have made this one right before.

The Commander sat back after putting the tapes of Shadow's room in and waited as the screen sped quickly through hours of material. The experiment paced circles around his room, sat on the floor, lay back and stared at the ceiling. And then Gerald appeared.

As he watched the Professor enter and allow Shadow to walk past him, his face did not change. He did not fly into a rage or stamp out to immediately execute the Professor. No, he simply tilted his head, dark eyes trained on the recording.

When it finished, he stood slowly and ejected the tape. Anger was beginning to bloom inside him, though he kept it under wraps. He wasn't surprised. Of course not. He'd known it had been Gerald all along; now he just had proof.

The mini radio strapped to his waist crackled to life. "Commander?"

"Report," the man said, all business.

"We've spotted the fugitives. They're on the bottom floor in Hall 1-E, most likely heading for the escape pods in the hangar. We're tracking their movements."

The Commander was silent for a long time. A smile slowly crept across his face as his hand tightened on the hard plastic. He knew

just how he could punish Gerald for his betrayal.

"Sir? Orders?"

"Get some men down there, now. But remain a safe distance away until further notice. Do not alert them of your presence." The Commander, still grinning wickedly, looked at the black tape in his hands and wondered how the Professor would react.

He left the recordings room and headed back to where Gerald was interred. The man's head was bowed. Already broken.

"I've found something interesting," the Commander said darkly. Without pause, he inserted the tape and the monitors all snapped to the recording. Gerald stared at the screens impassively as he saw himself letting Shadow escape. The Commander watched him closely, surprised at his lack of reaction. He expected crying or anger or even hysterics, not this aloof stare.

No matter. He would crack in good time.

"Do you have nothing to say?" the Commander asked impatiently.

Gerald looked at him. His eyes, hidden behind the dark glasses, were hollow. "I had no choice."

"You endangered all of humanity by willingly letting that thing escape. Obviously, such a crime warrants punishment." The Commander sat down and played with the controls, and the camera flipped to Hall 1-E.

Gerald's eyes widened as he took in the scene. Maria, his beautiful little granddaughter, was laughing and smiling. She was frazzled and tired and broken, that much was clear, but she was happy. Tears slipped down his face. He'd forgotten what her joy looked like.

He had taken that away from her.

The Commander narrowed his eyes. "You love her. Of course you do. And now you'll experience what so many other families will, if the experiment escapes and rains destruction on the world. I will make you understand what it's like to lose your loved ones to someone else's cruelty."

Gerald's face paled. "What do you mean?" The Professor's fingers dug tightly into the chair, his joy at seeing Maria alive fading.

The Commander ignored him and took out his radio. "Unit A, are you in position?"

"Yessir!" the radio crackled.

"Commence the attack. You will shoot to kill."

On the other end of the line, there was a pause. "... Sir? The girl?"

"Eliminate her."

"What?!" Gerald roared, hopping to his feet. The soldier at the door ran over, catching him as he lunged at the smug Commander. "You bastard! Maria has nothing to do with this!" he screamed, hysterical.

Shoved back into the chair, the old man gasped for breath and stared at the Commander in shock. How could he order them to murder his granddaughter? What had sweet, innocent Maria done to earn a death sentence?

His heart sank. It was him. She had been ordered to die, to punish his rebellion.

The Commander glared at him and allowed his rage to unfurl, his false calmness dissipating. He revelled in the feeling of hatred seeping through his bones. It was glorious.

" *You will watch this,*" he hissed.

His grimace turned into a wicked smile as the lights overhead began flashing red, an alarm resounding through the ARK as all the doors locked with a click. Over the speakers, a robotic female voice blared, "The ARK is now on lockdown. Please remain where you are and wait for further assistance."

"It appears that the hack was successful." The Commander looked eerie and strange washed in the red light.

Gerald gulped, but he refused to give up hope now. Maria and Shadow would be fine. He had kept her safe for that long, hadn't he? A few soldiers... Even with Maria as a direct target, they would be fine. They had to be fine.

And then he remembered, and it felt like a vice had clamped down on his heart. In lockdown mode, the escape pods couldn't be launched from the inside. Even if they managed to get away from the soldiers...

Shadow would have to make a sacrifice.

Maria stopped suddenly in her tracks, tense. Shadow looked back, feeling the moment all the happiness drained out of her. He swore he had never seen her look so petrified, the blue eyes huge as she shrank back.

"Something is wrong," she whispered.

Protectively, Shadow took a step towards her. He could feel it too, a strange unease lingering in the air. Raising his ears, he could hear something faintly, something like rhythmic pounding...

Then the world turned red and started to scream.

Maria crouched down, covering her ears as she was bathed in the eerie crimson lights. Even Shadow winced at the deafening noise as he looked around in alarm.

"Oh no..." Maria said hoarsely, her breath catching as she slowly straightened. "They've found us!"

At the same moment, Shadow heard that stamping noise getting closer and realized what it was. He grabbed Maria's arm, dragging her to him, and bullets ricocheted off the window behind her. They wasted no time in taking off down the hall, and Shadow didn't need to look back to see a dozen black uniforms streaming around the corner.

They were shooting at Maria, Shadow realized, and his hand tightened on hers. He pushed himself to run harder, nearly yanking the girl off her feet as she struggled to keep up.

They disappeared around doors, through hallways, bullets always biting their heels. But they couldn't lose the soldiers. These weren't the common men that had been chasing them all this time; they were elites. Gold stars were pinned to their uniforms, and their eyes were obscured behind dark visors.

But they ran, because it was all they could do.

The hedgehog grimaced as bullets ripped through him, his only consolation that they were shooting at him instead of Maria. He would have to dig those out later. But, for now, he only focused on getting Maria away from this place.

They were nearly there... They had to be.

At one point, Shadow looked back. Maria was white as a sheet, and he could feel her beginning to lose strength. She gasped every time her feet hit the floor, struggling in vain to regain her breath. She would collapse soon. But he'd carry her if he had to.

His eyes went past her and fell on one of the soldiers. He had his gun raised and was trying to focus, carefully training the weapon at his target as he ran. But he wasn't aiming at Shadow.

He wasn't aiming for Shadow.

Our lives can be solidly divided between two points: *Before* and *After*. Once you cross that line, everything changes. The life you once knew, the dreams you once held, all of that is gone. But as Shadow hurtled for the After, he found himself, for a moment, caught in the in-between.

His wide red eyes met Maria's blue ones, and it was like she *knew*.

And then shots resounded through the hall and she was ripped from his hand as the bullets tore through her.

"*Maria!*" Shadow screamed, and as she slipped through his fingers, he was reminded of the dreams where he could never catch her.

Maria slammed into the ground, her eyes wide in shock. She tried to reach out for Shadow, to get up and tell him she was okay. But her body wasn't responding, and the pain... Spreading out her back like a fire through her skin, immobilizing her, dimming her vision until it was only a blur.

And then, mercifully, she succumbed to the darkness and went still, one last shudder leaving her. Blood seeped out of her, pooling around her body.

In another part of the ship, far away, Gerald was screaming. It took three soldiers to restrain him as he wailed Maria's name and clawed at the Commander.

Standing in the hallway, Shadow and the soldiers were still. For a moment, everything had stopped. The men stared down at the still girl, only realizing in the silence what they had done. They had taken this young, innocent life, and snuffed it out.

Shadow couldn't move. Couldn't think, or comprehend what he was seeing. Maria... Maria had just been alive. How could her corpse be on the ground before him?

He realized he was shaking and his hands tightened into fists. Maria was dead.

Maria is *dead* .

He felt all his emotions, his dreams, everything he had once cared about draining away into the void of space. Falling out and puddling at his feet, like his friend's blood. Nothing mattered now.

Shadow was barely aware as he felt himself removing the rings around his wrists. The Professor had told him that they were called "inhibitor rings", and they would keep his chaos powers under wraps.

"There could be an accident," he had said. "You could be channelling chaos without even knowing. Or you could kill someone you only meant to disable. Never take these rings off unless there's something or someone that needs to be utterly destroyed."

He would wipe these men from the world.

Shadow felt nothing as he rushed at the soldiers. He was dimly aware that he was screaming, howling. But not even the hot rage could seep through the coldness enveloping his body. There was nothing left in this world for him. He was alone.

Soldiers fell easily at his feet. Chaos coursed through his veins, every beat of his pounding heart sending unimaginable power running through him. Men were beaten and slammed into the wall until they were unrecognizable, torn in half by the sheer force of his energy, their charred and blackened corpses hitting the ground.

Blood rained down around Shadow, staining the walls and windows red. Utter horror showed on the men's faces, and every one knew this creature's endless power. Some sobbed and begged for mercy; others tried to escape the carnage. All of them were soon limp on the floor, terror cemented into their wide, lifeless eyes.

There would be no mercy. They had shown none for Maria.

The final soldier was a young man with wild dark hair. His visor had been lost, ripped off his head from a bolt of chaos that had nearly hit him. The man stumbled backwards and tripped over one of his friend's bodies, hitting the wall with a cry.

Nearly exhausted of energy, Shadow picked up a pistol and trained it on the man. The soldier stared at the experiment's wavering red eyes, wild with insanity, and knew he had no chance. But he covered his face and begged, anyway, "P-please... Please don't kill me..."

The hedgehog hesitated, though he didn't know why. Maria's voice flooded his head, drowning out the violent, wild thoughts.

So many people have died because of me... They're all gone just because of my existence! Isn't that enough?

Shadow found that his hand was shaking. He hesitated, but finally, threw the gun to the side with a growl. The soldier wasted no time in scrambling away. He ripped his earpiece out, relieved from the Commander's screams, and looked at his dark hands. These hands had taken a little girl's life. The man closed his eyes and finally allowed himself to cry.

Shadow stood silent in a circle of bodies, every breath coming through clenched teeth as aimless thoughts swirled through his mind. Then, it was done. They were all dead.

And yet, this vengeance brought him no joy. Because Maria was still...

Shadow's eyes came into focus as he finally snapped out of his hysteria. Maria. He had to help Maria. He ran to the girl and dropped to his knees by her body. Frantically, he rolled her onto her back and felt for a pulse. He shuddered a sigh of relief as he felt it, weak and barely there.

But as Shadow looked down at her, he realized that it didn't matter. She wouldn't be alive for long. She was barely breathing and her

clothes were soaked with blood - there was just too much blood. Holes were ripped in the back of her shirt where the bullets had gone through. And she was pale, so pale.

"Maria..." Shadow called, almost expecting the girl to hop up and continue rambling about Earth. But she was lifeless in his arms, slowly beginning to fade away. "Come on, Maria, we're - " he choked, shameless tears leaving streaks on his fur, " - we're almost there! You can't give up now..."

And Shadow cried, the full force of despair ripping through him and tearing him apart. He had never felt something quite like this horrible emotion. Rage, joy, he had known all of that. But not this heart-wrenching anguish.

He closed his eyes tightly to stop the tears, hoping that when he opened them again, this will all have been a dream.

And Maria's eyes slowly opened, bleary. She felt weak, so weak, like she couldn't even take a breath. And the pain... A dull ache that trembled then shot through her body in waves if she so much as took a breath.

Every tiny movement threatened to wrench a scream from her throat, but even so, she reached up weakly and wiped away Shadow's tears. The hedgehog tensed at her touch, his eyes snapping open. "Maria!"

She looked up at him, and though she could barely think through the agony, her face was still etched with concern. "Are you... hurt?"

Shadow wanted to laugh and cry. She could barely even speak, but she was worried about him. "You need help," was all he could manage.

Maria attempted to sit up, but she fell back down with a whimper. "W-we need to get out of here," she said hoarsely. "The escape pods... they'll lock them..."

It was already too late for that. "No," Shadow said firmly. "You need to rest."

But not even Shadow could stop her. "I'll be okay," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster, using the protesting hedgehog to pull herself to her feet. She began to stumble forward, clutching the wall for support. "We're nearly there, so we can't stop now."

"Maria..." Shadow still sat on the ground.

"Let's go, Shadow!" Maria cried shrilly, and the terror in her voice forced him to his feet.

They continued on at a slow pace. At first Maria needed to use Shadow as a support, but eventually she managed to limp slowly on her own. With every step she took, agony filled her body, but she clamped her mouth shut and refused to cry out.

But she was getting weaker.

She left a trail of blood behind her as she walked. The gaping holes in her back gushed with every step, and they would never heal with her moving like this. *I can't stop*, she thought, as her mind and vision began to cloud over. *I can't give up*.

Shadow watched her in consternation, noting the lifeless look in her eyes, until she began to walk slower and slower. "Maria, come on. You have to take a break," he finally said.

Maria shook her head. "I'm fine... I can do it, see?" She took a step, wincing, though she could barely feel the pain anymore. The fog began to consume her and she suddenly felt light, like she was flying away into space. "I... I..."

Shadow gasped and reached out to catch her, stumbling to the floor as she fainted. It was only a lapse in consciousness, and she was

awake in a moment. But he knew immediately that something about her had changed.

"Shadow... I'm dying, Shadow..." Her voice was soft, resigned. Her hope had drained away.

The hedgehog's eyes widened and he stiffened. "Don't talk like that!" he snapped, and softened his voice when the girl flinched. "You're fine! You'll be fine."

Maria's dim eyes looked up at him, and at that moment she made a decision. "Please leave me, Shadow. I'm only slowing you down. I want you to see Earth and be happy without me."

Shadow's grip tightened on her. "I'm not leaving you alone, Maria. We're going to Earth. *Together*. That's the promise I made to you, and I'm going to keep it." With that, he scooped her light body up and began to run.

Maria let her head drift back. She stared at the lights as they passed under them and knew that she would never look up like this at the sky.

They were quiet for a long time, his pounding footsteps the only sound as they ran down halls washed red. The weaker Maria got, the harder Shadow's resolve became. He wasn't going to lose her, not now. Maria had been dreaming of this day her whole life, and so she would live.

"Shadow..." Maria's voice was too weak, not right. Shadow looked at her eyes and shuddered as he realized they were blind. "I can't see. Are we on Earth?"

The hedgehog swallowed a lump in his throat and did his best to sound happy through his tears. "Yeah, Maria, we made it. We're on Earth, and I - I'm going to find someone who can help you. It's okay. We're going to be okay."

He wondered if he was trying to convince Maria or himself.

The little girl shivered. "I'm cold... Is it snowing?"

Shadow sniffed. "Yeah... There's snow everywhere. Just like you always dreamed, remember?"

Maria smiled faintly, revelling in her delirium, but her smile faltered. "Don't leave me... please. I don't want to be alone here."

"I'm here, Maria." Shadow closed his eyes, stopping for a moment, before resuming his sprint. "I'm right here."

Shadow didn't think as he ran. There was nothing to think about. He had no doubt in his mind: He and Maria would escape this wretched place together. And they would never, ever look back.

He looked at her dull eyes, her limp body, the weak grip she had around him. She was dying. But he could save her.

He would save her.

Gerald's heart turned to ice.

He stood, shaking uncontrollably, his hands restrained behind him as he stared at the camera where Maria's lifeless body lay. And as Shadow ripped apart the soldiers, unleashing the monster Gerald always knew he had inside him, his body quaked with laughter. The soldiers holding him back stiffened in terror, gaping at the massacre and at the insane professor.

The Commander screamed into his radio, even after a stray blast of chaos took the cameras out, but no one responded.

Gerald could hardly hear the shouts. He stared at the door intently, waiting for his opportunity. And the moment one of the guards' grips loosened on him, he snapped his arms away and took off.

"Hey!" The guards launched themselves at him and fell to the ground.

Gerald pushed himself faster than he thought he, such an old man, could ever run. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, enabling him to avoid the bullets that tore up the ground and walls once the soldiers recovered.

The Professor made it to the cockpit. Even in lockdown the doors would always open to him. It locked behind him and the pounding began, then the crashes as they tried to break down the metal frame. But it wouldn't matter before long. Nothing mattered now.

Gerald strode over to the controls and pressed one of the many glowing buttons. For the moment, his shaking hands were steady as he easily worked the controls. A holographic panel stretched across the cockpit window, and Gerald smiled.

The ARK's operating system was extremely refined for its time period, using hologram touch screens and overseen by a simple AI known as Sophisticated Operating Program-Heuristic Information Assistant (SOP-HIA).

In fact, SOP-HIA was what Gerald had modelled Shadow after. The AI could do limited things on its own, such as cleaning up servers, diagnosing and fixing crashes, announcing pre-recorded emergency messages over the speakers, and even auto-piloting the ship. But it could not ignore a human command, and some things it needed permission to do. And, of course, it couldn't think for itself.

Obviously, Gerald had failed at making Shadow like her.

"Hello, Gerald Robotnik. Please enter your password." SOP-HIA's mechanical voice resounded through the small room, blocking out the pounding for a moment.

"Ma-Ri-A."

"The ARK is currently on lockdown. Some features may be disabled. Thank you for your understanding."

Gerald ignored the AI's warning and set to work, swiping past screens until he found the navigation controls. He chuckled to himself, too far gone to care about what he was doing, as he set the course for Earth.

Maria would never get to realize her dream; she would never go to Earth. And so the planet she loved would die with her.

"Solar object detected at destination point. This route may cause the ARK to collide with a planet or other body. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Please re-enter your password."

Gerald sighed in annoyance and repeated it. The pounding was getting more insistent, and it wouldn't be long until they broke down the door. Swiping through options, he began to set the time until the course would begin.

Gerald wanted a minute to collect his thoughts, so he decided not to execute it immediately. Plus, he was going to have a great time watching them frantically scramble to cancel the command for the next hour. So he typed in 50 to the field and tapped the drop-down menu to select Minutes, Hours, Days, Weeks, Months, or Years.

And then the door slammed to the ground and his finger jumped. *Years*. There was no time to correct his mistake, so he slammed the confirm button just as the soldiers tackled him to the ground.

The Commander stared at the countdown on the screen. "What is that?!" he screamed at Gerald, then whipped around to the screen. "Cancel! Cancel!"

"Please re-enter your password," SOP-HIA chirped, almost smugly.

"What is it?! Where did you set it to go?!" The Commander grabbed Gerald, but the Professor only grinned up at him, a darkness in his eyes.

Even after a punch knocked him to the floor, the Professor could only laugh. He laughed and laughed until the guards dragged him away.

"Hey..." Maria opened her eyes and blinked at Shadow's face peering down at her. Somehow, amidst all the horrors, she had fallen asleep. "We're here. We made it."

Maria's heart jumped, but she realized quickly that he only meant the hangar. She gazed around, pulling herself up. The hangar was a huge semicircle, stretching all the way to the opposite end of the ARK. A multitude of ships from G.U.N.'s fleet were here: small war vessels equipped with blasters to bulky spacecrafts designed for storage.

The girl stared out the window on the opposite end of the ship. She could just barely see the specks of stars. "It's too late," she said softly. Her voice was clear, the deliria gone. "The whole ship must be locked down by now."

Shadow said nothing, his eyes narrowing. The escape pods were lined up against the wall, so they only had a moment's walk. The hedgehog used his elbow to press a button, opening one of the pod's doors, and gently set Maria down inside the cylindrical glass enclosure.

Shadow turned to the controls on the other side. SOP-HIA greeted him as he pressed the launch button. "Welcome, Maria Robotnik, and, Experiment 56," she said in her hitched robotic voice. Shadow was surprised that he was acknowledged. "Please enter your password."

"Ma-Ri-A," the girl herself said. Grandfather had told her why the password was broken up: It was her name written in the Sajiyepean

language. - - .

"The ARK is currently in a state of lockdown. A manual launch is required. Thank you for your understanding." The lights on the buttons shut off.

Shadow slammed his hands on the controls. "Damn it!"

Maria pulled her knees to her chest. There was no hope now. Shadow was going to pull that lever, and she would have to watch him disappear as she hurtled towards Earth. He would die for her. And she would be all alone until she slipped away too.

They shouldn't both have to die.

Maria raised her head and gazed at the manual launch controls mounted on the wall outside the escape pod. She looked at Shadow, his back to her. And it dawned on her what she would have to do if she wanted him to live.

"I'm sorry, Shadow..." she said softly.

Shadow stared at the controls, pressing different buttons in a vain attempt to override the system. "Don't worry, Maria, we'll figure this out. Maybe... we can stow away on the G.U.N. ship and... No, they'll definitely find us."

Maria crawled out of the pod and shakily stood next to the controls. "We could find somewhere to hide... Yeah, double back to the infirmary and try to patch you up. We'll just wait until they're - "

The escape pod's doors slid shut.

Shadow turned slowly and saw her there, on the other side of the glass. And he was reminded of the first time he saw her, glowing like a star, looking like she could do anything in the world. She could warm his frozen heart, and then, in the same moment, tear it from his chest.

The dissociative calm washed away, replaced by panic as he realized what she was doing. He banged on the glass, trying to shatter it, but it was strong enough to resist a crash at thousands of miles per hour. "Maria, no! There has to be another way!"

The young girl shook her head. She sat on her knees in front of the escape pod, her hand over Shadow's. He knew she was terrified by the shake of her arms and the scared light in her eyes, but she still smiled sincerely as she crouched before him.

Shadow stared at Maria, unconsciously taking in every detail, cementing this too in his mind. She was weary, beginning to weaken, but she drew herself up and did her best to be strong. An illumination seemed to come from within her. And, on the outside, the blue light of space made her glow.

She was like a candle flame, the smallest spark of rebellious light. Dancing - dancing until she finally goes out.

"Will you make me another promise?" Maria asked.

"Maria..." Shadow's eyes welled up and he blinked back tears. It wasn't too late. He could talk her out of this.

The girl took a breath and locked eyes with her friend. "I know all you've ever wanted is to help me get to Earth. So, in my place, please help the people on that planet be happy. Give them a chance to realize their dreams!"

Shadow's hands were fists on the glass, trying to break through to her. Like always, failing. "What about the promise we made - that we would go to Earth together? What about *your* dream, Maria?!"

Maria closed her eyes. "I'm never going to Earth, Shadow," she said quietly. "So I want everyone there to live the life I can't have. They deserve to be happy too!" She opened them, and Shadow was thrown by the force of the determination in her eyes. "I want you to

watch over and protect that planet, and to bring hope to humanity. That's what you should live for, Shadow."

"You're wrong!" Shadow cried. "I have no reason to exist - except for you, Maria!"

The girl's gaze softened, but she couldn't argue anymore. She was running out of time. "Do it for me, Shadow... So that even if I can't live for my dreams, you and everyone on Earth can. Please."

"I can't..." Shadow's shoulders fell. "I can't live up to that..."

"Promise me..." Her voice was quiet, too quiet. The Darkness was coming back.

"I..." Shadow met her eyes, and he wanted to say no, he couldn't, he can't. "I promise."

Maria smiled weakly and her gaze fell to the floor. She slowly reached for the lever and grabbed it, but she couldn't even find enough strength to pull down. She was tired... so, so tired. Her hand slid off the glass as she began to slump, falling into the fog.

Shadow watched her, eyes darting over her weakening body, her dull expression. "Maria..." he whispered, barely able to choke the tiny word out. "No..."

You promised.

You promised you'd always be with me. We would be together on Earth, and I... I was supposed to keep you safe. Even if it was only for a little while, I wanted us to be happy there. That was our promise. That was our dream!

There was no reason for me to exist. I didn't even know why I was made. But you told me that the future was in my hands; that I could do with my powers what I wished and find my own reason for being.

You gave me hope. A better future, for both of us. That was all that I wanted.

And, finally, even I had something worth living for.

With her last lingering bit of strength, Maria shoved the fog away and her hand tightened on the lever. That was the last time Shadow saw her, with that look of pure resolve on her face.

The hedgehog was struck by her bravery. When he'd met her, he thought she was just a cowering little girl, but he realized that she'd been stronger than him all along.

With all the force left in her dying body, she pulled the lever. And she fell, every last bit of strength drained out of her, landing on her side. There was no fight left in her now, so she didn't struggle as her eyes closed and she faded away.

"*MARIA!*" Shadow screamed, the glass nearly cracking under his fists, and the escape pod launched.

And as a hedgehog was sent spiralling for the planet below, a little girl, lost in time, began to dream.

Interlude

Maria... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

There is nothing.

Surrounding him are a million stars. He had always dreamed of flying among those lights, drifting through the depths of space. But now, he doesn't dream of anything. Once a beacon of hope, they only represent what he's lost. A little girl died among those same stars.

Her light is fading. He wanders alone in the dark.

It should have been her on this vessel. She wouldn't have lived long, he knows that now. But he would have died so she could have had just a few moments of happiness on Earth. So she could fall into the snow and look up at the perfect blue sky and die there.

A snow angel. She would have wanted that.

But she faded away in the cold, dead reaches of space.

Anger seeps through the numb shock. That was all that she had ever wanted. But that kind, selfless girl had given up everything for him. She sacrificed her best friend, her pacifism, and her life... all for a worthless person like him.

He had held onto her as hard as he could, but still she slipped away. And the emptiness of a future without Maria leaves him numb.

How could she have asked him to protect humanity? Humans had done this to her. Throughout his whole life, they had done nothing but ruin. Scientists had treated him like he wasn't alive. Gerald had forced him to break Maria. G.U.N. finally ended her.

After all that, how could he think that these cruel creatures deserved to live? How could he believe that humans could be good? Maria... Maria was the only one.

And now she's gone.

But he promised.

If Maria truly believed that humans should live their lives, even after having her own dreams ripped away from her, then there was nothing he could do to fix this. Her death would, forever, be unavenged. But it didn't matter what she had asked of him. He could never bring hope to humanity if he had no hope left for himself.

Sinking through the atmosphere. The sky around him changed, and all of a sudden, it was moving away from him.

Shadow didn't feel it as the escape pod crashed, embedding itself into the earth. Earth... Blinking, not understanding, he stared at the sky as he lay on the glass. Pale blue, streaked with... clouds? A bright spot of light, the sun, cast its dawn glow upon the world.

He was in a place of trees, called... a forest, he remembered. The branches towered above him, waving in the wind, seeming as if they would reach down to grab him. On the ARK, nothing moved. But here, nothing stopped moving. His world, once comprised of dead space and cold metal walls, was overflowing with life.

Maria would have loved this, he thought.

He knew they were coming. But he didn't care anymore.

He lay there and watch the clouds drift across the sky for what seemed like hours, but maybe it was only minutes. Shadow was dimly aware of shouting, of people peering into the pod. He heard the doors slide open, felt them dragging him out into the snow.

He watched the sky.

And then a prick in his arm, the pain that faded in mere moments.
Sweet, sweet sleep.

The sky began to go dark. Maria's snowy night. He saw it clearly now; the place she had seen in her delusions was real.

His body fought the tranquilizers, but his soul embraced them. Soon, the darkness claimed him and carried him away. Shadow didn't care what happened anymore. He wanted Maria. He wouldn't settle for a world that didn't have her.

Inexplicably, though he knew he must be half-asleep from the drugs, he saw her standing over him. He lay in darkness and behind her was light, light, light. She crouched down, putting a hand on his chest, fingers knotted in the white fur.

I'm still breathing, he thought. You don't have to worry.

She stood then, and as she turned the light pulled her away. He wanted to reach out, to get up and run into that light, but he was paralyzed on the ground. He fought the darkness now, trying to get away, to catch her.

But then he couldn't resist anymore. Struggling, he was dragged away from her, back into the dark again. Finally, he slipped into blissful, numb sleep.

It's Earth. Isn't it beautiful? I'm going to go there someday.

Maria.

I'm not afraid of you, I'm just... afraid.

Maria.

I promise that I'll never leave you again!

Maria.

Shadow... I'm out of time.

Maria.

Promise me...

Maria.

I'm alive, she thought.

Or rather, she pretended.

When Maria first woke up in the middle of the raging blizzard, she had screamed for Shadow, for Grandfather, for Rei. Their souls resounded, some closer than others. But nobody answered. Nobody came.

White snow was the only thing around her, obscuring the horizon with frantic whirling snowflakes. No silhouettes, no shadows, no trail to follow. Just light. At first, that was how Eternity was. Empty, and aimless.

And when no one responded to her call, Maria had picked herself up off the ground and gazed into a snowy wasteland that seemed to be staring back into her. With no other options, she had just started walking. On and on she staggered, feeling like her soul had split into pieces.

She didn't feel exhaustion. She didn't feel pain. Just cold. And when she couldn't walk anymore, she had lain down in the snow and woken up here.

She was still there, sleeping. And there was another part of her missing too. But, for now, she was here as well.

Maria held her hand out in front of her and wiggled her fingers, stared at the lock of her hair falling into her face that twisted as she

tossed her head. She looked, presumably, like a normal little girl. But one glance at the mirror mounted on the wall dispelled that thought.

There was nothing there.

Plus, it was hard to pretend when she couldn't feel her own body, or the ground she was standing on, or even the warmth of her own skin. It wasn't a cold feeling, like it had been in the dreamworld. It was nothing, nothing, nothing.

She ran her hands along the painted walls. She slammed her fist into the mirror. But there was no indication that she had touched them at all.

A man sat behind a counter with a glass wall, and Maria walked up to him. "Excuse me," she said. But, as she knew would happen, the man stared through her.

She tried to pick up the pencil on the desk and throw it at him. But though she could put her fingers around it, it refused to move, like it was bolted to the counter. Gravity, walls, all of that still affected her. But otherwise, it was like she wasn't there at all.

A paper doll, she thought. She had made those, long ago. Little cut-out dolls that played on pieces of paper with rooms drawn on them. Never quite a part of the world, but almost. Almost.

The door behind Maria opened, and as the girl turned, she felt like maybe she had died again. "Grandfather?" she whimpered as a resigned Gerald walked past her, escorted by a guard on either side.

His head was down, broken, but she could see a strange glint in his eyes. So different from the warmth that once filled them. And he looked so, so much older. But Maria realized that she had no idea how long she had been out. It could have been a few short months, or decades. The time she spent in that strange limbo, if it could be called "time" at all, had blurred together.

"Robotnik?" the man behind the glass wall asked. Gerald turned to look at him, and Maria shuddered at her grandfather's dead eyes.

The man glanced through his paperwork for a moment, as a formality, but everyone knew that today was his day. He nodded and looked the Professor in the eye. His glasses were gone. "Good luck, sir."

Gerald said nothing. His head drooped again as the guards led him outside. Maria ran alongside them, ducking through the door before it closed. "Grandfather!" she cried, grabbing at his sleeve, but it slipped through her fingers. "Look at me, Grandfather!" But despite her screams, his eyes were fixed on the ground.

Maria stopped when she realized where they had walked to. She turned about, surveying the area. They stood inside a small semi-circle coliseum, flanked on four sides by guard towers. On one end sat a hundred people who couldn't see her. On the other, it was just a red-stained white wall.

The crowd cheered.

That was where they forced Gerald to his knees in the dust, before that wall streaked with the gore of past war criminals. "Get that away from me," he spat as a guard approached him with a blindfold, and the soldier retreated.

Maria didn't realize what was happening until five men, each with long black rifles propped against their shoulders, lined up in front of him. She remembered how G.U.N. had executed the scientists and guards on the ARK. But she never thought... She never thought that Grandfather...

Tears welled up and she had to cover her eyes to block out the horrific sight before her, of her kind grandfather who hated weapons facing death. *That's odd too*, she thought. *Even the dead can cry.*

"Gerald Robotnik," announced the middle soldier, "you have been convicted of conspiring and committing treason against the United Federation. On this day, August 17, 1967 - " *I've been gone for five years*, Maria thought, " - you have been sentenced to death by firing squad. You will be shot in the heart until you are dead."

The man cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Do you have any last words?"

The only answer the soldier received was a cold stare from equally icy-coloured eyes.

The man nodded. "Commence the countdown. Thirty... Twenty-nine..."

No one saw the little girl walking across the stadium. No one, that is, except for Gerald. His eyes raised and met hers, and it was only a moment before he broke down into sobs. Maria wrapped her arms around her poor grandfather, and though neither of them could feel it, she squeezed him as tightly as she could.

"Maria..." he sobbed. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"You didn't do anything," she said, and she gulped, remembering the pain that had ripped through her body in those last moments. She couldn't feel it anymore. "It wasn't your fault."

"No," he gasped, and he sat up straight, his eyes widening. "You don't understand... I did something... I did something to the ARK..."

"What?" Maria pulled away, staring at him with wide eyes.

"Ten... nine... eight..."

To the soldiers, the rambling, sobbing old man was simply hysteric. One of the men rubbed his eyes, blinking rapidly. His vision wavered and he was seeing things he shouldn't be.

"Keep it together, greenie," a man beside him muttered.

The soldier shook his head, returning to firing position. But he blinked again, and for just a moment, he saw it clearly. A little girl. He jolted, but in the next second, she was gone.

He remembered the stories then. It could have been a lie; nothing was more than speculation when it came to *that* operation. But the men had been telling tales of a little girl who had died in the great purge of the ARK, where G.U.N. had taken out a horde of treasonous, violent offenders who refused to come quietly.

Didn't the once famous and esteemed professor, Gerald Robotnik, have a granddaughter? Had she somehow gotten caught in the crossfire?

"Five... four... three..." The five men tensed.

"The ARK... The ARK... There's no stopping it. Only my voice..." Gerald moaned, insanity fogging his mind. "Maria... I'm so sorry..."

"FIRE!"

Four shots rang out that day.

And that was the end of Gerald Robotnik.

Shadow? Can you hear me?

Wait for me, Shadow. I'm not gone. It feels like a part of me is sleeping, waiting for something to happen - but I'm still here. I'm dead, but I'm still here.

I know you're alive - I can feel you out there somewhere. And I know you can hear me. Shadow, wherever you are... I swear, I will find you.

Don't be afraid. No matter what, you have to promise me that you won't be afraid. When you wake up, you'll be in a different world. But

I'll always be with you. Even if you can't see me, even if you don't know I'm there, I'll never leave you again.

I'm sorry. It's too late. You can't save me anymore.

But if there's anything I can do, I swear I'll save you.

This isn't the end, Shadow. No, this is an interlude. Our story has only just begun.

A/N:

**Thank you to everyone who's read, favourited, and reviewed. ^^
Even if it hasn't gotten as much attention as some of my other stories, this one means a lot to me and I appreciate it.**

The Memory is the next in the series, so look for that if you want to see what comes next. I also post art of this series occasionally on my DeviantArt, and talk about it/answer questions on Tumblr, if you're interested in such things. Links on my profile.

Thank you for reading. See you guys next time.